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May 4, 2001

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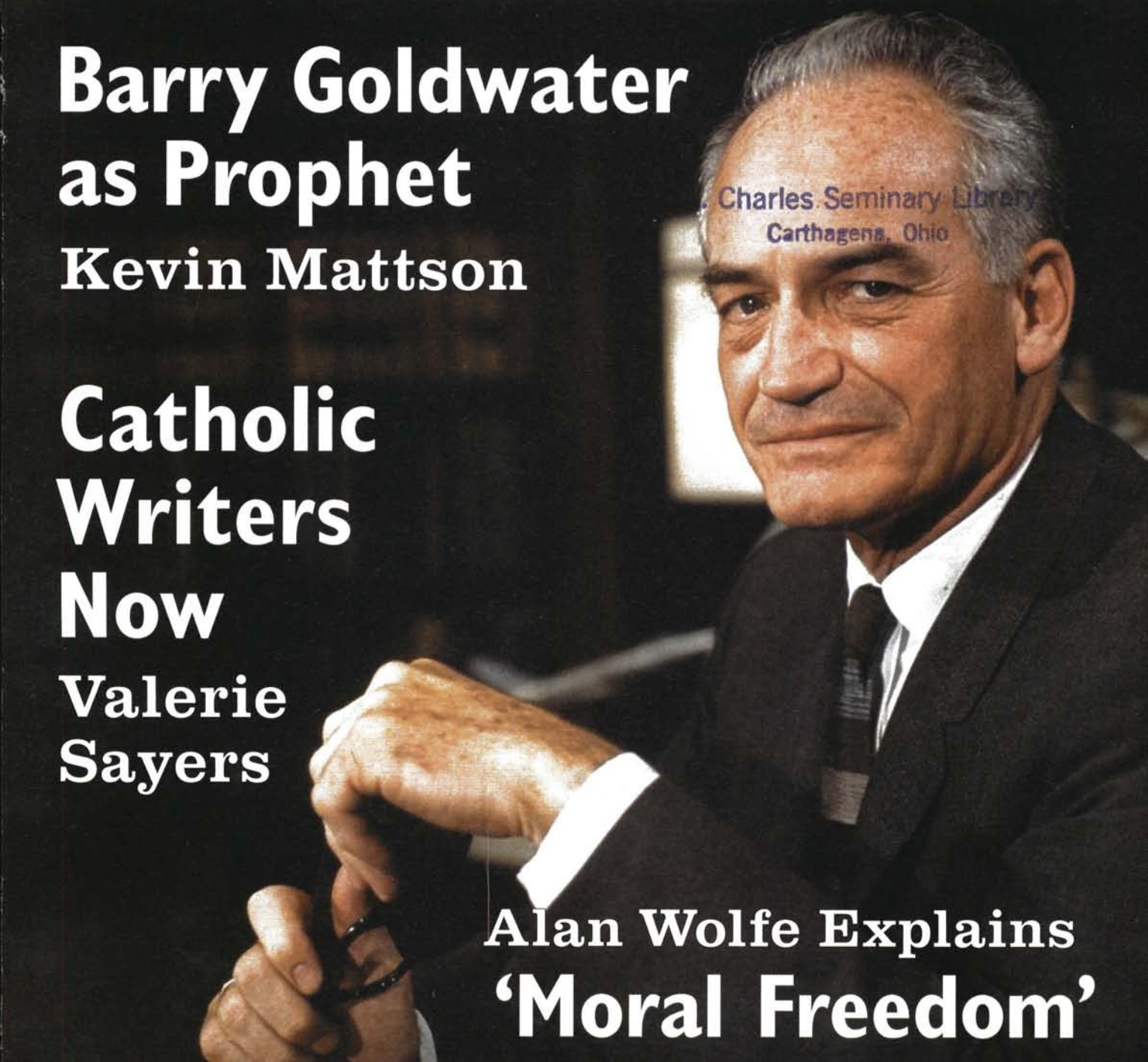

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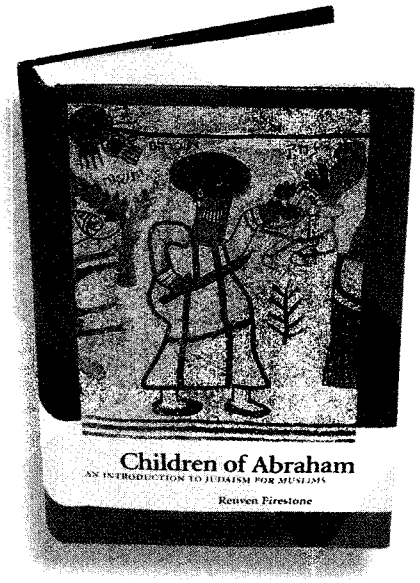

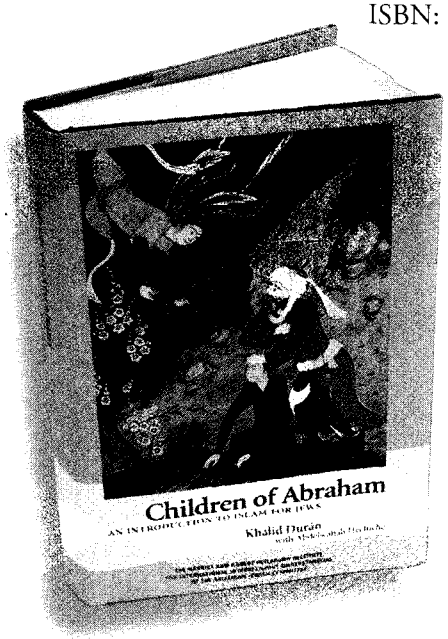

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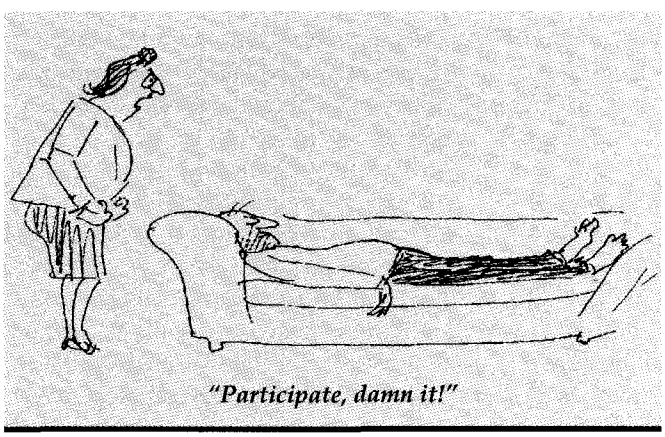

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To the Editors

Bow...

In his "Last Word" column ("God's Best Friend," April 6), Frans Jozef van Beeck mentions that he has never seen a dog at Mass. In Honduras, a group I was with stayed at a girl's orphanage and boarding school for a week. They had Mass in a small chapel with no adornment (not even an altar rail). At Mass, all the girls were present, as well as their house mothers and other adults who were around the premises. We were also joined by two dogs. One lay at the back, and one lay right in front of the altar through the entire Mass. And at the end we were singing a song, clapping, and the dogs barked along with us.

MATTHEW SHADLE
Conway, Ariz.

Wow

I enjoyed Father van Beeck's article, and while he mentioned that he has yet to see a dog in church, my own experience in Latin America has included dogs marching into church during Mass and wandering up and down the aisles. This is hardly an interruption, but is a sign of the presence of life in the Lord's house. But I still believe that we don't need Communion rails to keep them out. After all, we allow the Order of Preachers—called the *Domini canes*, the dogs of the Lord—into our churches.

JOHN DONAGHY
Ames, Iowa

Egan's mirth

As to your editorial accusing Cardinal Edward Egan of little Christian mirth ("All Dressed Up," March 23), believe me, when he headed the education department of the Archdiocese of New York, he brought little mirth, Christian or otherwise, to the Catholic lay teachers. He extolled the benefits of a "bare-bones approach" to financing Catholic education. As always, it is on the bare bones of Catholic lay teachers that the church and its families have placed the responsibility for the religious education of each successive generation. Perhaps the new cardinal will find a way to treat his teachers with some Roman excess in the next contract negotiations.

Your insight into Avery Dulles's rapid turn right and the more than coincidental red hat it earned him is also appreciated. Dulles denounced "triumphalism, clericalism, and juridicism" as the three great threats to the modern church in his wonderful book, *Models of the Church*, and then went on to defend the ban on women's ordination with argumentation as distressing as these same abuses. I guess consistency is not one of the qualifications for elevation.

THOMAS ROGERS
Tuscon, Ariz.

What's a metaphysician

I haven't yet read Michael Ruse's *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?*, but from John Haught's March 9 review, it sounds like a welcome addition to the debate. Still, I wish that Haught had not been so hung up on the distinction between "methodological" and "metaphysical" materialism. To my ears, the latter sounds like an oxymoron, and it is probably to Ruse's credit that he did not address it. Darwinism is a "materialistic theory" to the same extent as are heliocentrism, Newtonian mechanics, or Einsteinian relativity. A fundamental assumption of modern science is that physical phenomena result from physical causes. However, an equally central dogma of science is that of reproducibility—an observation must be made many times before it can be scientifically evaluated. Thus the point that has been made many times that miracles, by definition, are outside the purview of science. The very existence of the universe, and of life itself for that matter, has so far been observed only once, and therefore questions about its origins remain out of reach of materialism—a point Darwin himself appreciated.

CHARLES MURTAUGH
Brookline, Mass.

The reviewer replies:

The source of Murtaugh's complaint lies quite simply in his erroneous assumption that the term "metaphysics" refers literally to what lies "beyond the physical." This is why the commonly used expression "metaphysical materialism" strikes him as an oxymoron.

However, even Aristotle did not understand the term "metaphysics" in such a supernaturalist sense, but rather as a more general approach (than physics) to understanding whatever is, including the physical world. The term "metaphysics" is also used by extension to name what a person or group takes to be ultimately real. For the materialist, what is ultimately real is physical stuff, implying therefore that there is in fact nothing other than matter. This is what is meant by "metaphysical materialism." Michael Ruse, contrary to what Murtaugh thinks, accepts the important distinction between methodological and metaphysical materialism. Ruse knows what metaphysical materialists are, since he explicitly numbers himself among them. So when he calls Darwinism a "materialist theory" he is saying much more than that evolution is just another scientific theory. It is Ruse's conflation of science and metaphysical materialism that I object to. I suspect that Murtaugh would also.

JOHN F. HAUGHT

Mislabeled

I enjoyed William Galston's advice ("Contending with Liberalism," April 6) for Catholics, but I have some advice of my own. Prolife advocates have permitted the opposition to label them incorrectly "conservative." If the fetus is human, prolife advocates are "liberal." My advice is: don't let others label you.

TOM HOLDER
Westminster, Md.

(Continued on page 36)

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Vatican deliberations

Later this month the church's 184 cardinals will gather at the Vatican for the sixth consistory of Pope John Paul II's pontificate. The subject of this meeting, the first since 1994 when the pope broached the idea of issuing an apology for historic Catholic offenses, will be to chart the direction of the church for the third millennium. John Paul's apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte (At the Start of the New Millennium)*, which was released January 6, the last day of the Jubilee Year, will serve as an outline for the four-day gathering (May 21–24). It is expected that the consistory will influence the agenda for next October's synod of bishops in Rome.

During John Paul's pontificate, synods and consistories have been criticized for being tightly managed by the curia and consequently for reflecting the Vatican's agenda rather than the concerns, legitimate interests, and views of the church's bishops. Sadly, there is little indication that this shortsighted approach to episcopal collegiality will change. Contentious issues, such as the priestly discipline of celibacy or the control Rome now exerts over the appointment of bishops, are almost never raised. There is an element of charade to the whole enterprise. Yet the church needs inspiring leadership at all levels, not just from the pope, and not just as a chorus behind every papal declaration. A few brave souls can occasionally be heard urging publicly that the bishops speak in their own voices and take back a fair measure of authority from Rome. Cardinal Carlo Martini, the archbishop of Milan, in responding to the pope's apostolic letter, recently called for "more concrete forms of collegiality"—in short, more power sharing between the Vatican and local ordinaries. Archbishop John Quinn boldly accepted the pope's invitation in *Ut unum sint* (1995) to rethink the Petrine ministry in light of the ecumenical challenges of the modern world (see "The Exercise of the Primacy," *Commonweal*, July 12, 1996). But timidity and docility predominate when bishops are faced with Vatican edicts, as the American bishops demonstrated in reversing themselves on *Ex corde ecclesiae* (see "Theologians in the Dock," page 6).

As the cardinals and the pope draw up what John Paul calls "an effective post-jubilee pastoral plan," they have much to consider. Reviewing the jubilee year and celebrating its achievements—the pope's pilgrimage to Israel, World Youth Day in Rome—the apostolic letter also assesses the continuing difficulties surrounding ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, biotechnology, and modern materialism. John Paul warns that whatever practical plans are put in place for evangelization, unless the church lives the gospel and in so doing "shows" the face of Christ to the larger world, nothing lasting will be accomplished. Catholics must open themselves to the universal call to holiness, because holiness is "a message that convinces without the need for words." The church must also strive for a real "spirituality of communion," which can also show, by the strength of the church's own unity, what the true Christian life means. "The new century will have to see us more than ever intent on valuing and developing the forums and structures which, in accordance with the Second Vatican Council's major directives, serve to ensure and safeguard communion," the pope writes. That will entail a reexamination of the Petrine ministry. "There is certainly much more to be

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done," John Paul adds, in reforming the curia.

John Paul's enormous personal impact, Rome's increasing centralization of power made possible by modern communications, and the curia's inherent self-aggrandizing tendencies, have all combined to push Vatican II's promise of greater episcopal collegiality further and further away. The church's cardinals should now do the pope the honor of taking him at his word about reform, as should the bishops' synod next October. In the new millennium, the church must show itself to be increasingly collegial, increasingly open to scrutiny (especially i the work of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ncreasingly attentive to how its own internal structure an operation too often contradict the message it preaches. Yet even as the pope invites change he seems to deflect it. In the same section of *Novo millennio ineunte* where John Paul champions the development of new "structures and forums" such as priests' councils, he is quick to remind readers that they "are not governed by the rules of parliamentary democracy because they are consultative rather than deliberative."

The Catholic church is hierarchical, not congregational, and its ecclesiology should not strictly mirror democratic procedures. At the same time, a more responsive decision-making process is needed. Synods of bishops, for example, are also consultative rather than deliberative. But shouldn't bishops be more than the pope's amen corner? A genuine collegiality would recognize that the pope shepherds the church in unity with the bishops, not as a monarchical figure with absolute authority over his junior ministers. Of course, the unity John Paul desires is not easy to achieve when authority is more widely dispersed. But false, or merely imposed, unanimity is worse still. The pope and the curia may "govern" the church's structure, but increasingly that structure—as the pope's call to the new evangelization recognizes—is seen as distant and unresponsive by people in the pews. Even worse, the longer Rome presumes to dictate and rarely to listen, to demand obedience but never to relinquish power, the more Catholics grow indifferent to the very idea of religious authority. If Rome cannot trust its bishops, let alone laypeople, to deliberate and not just to consult about the future of the church, what does the "spirituality of communion" really mean?

ET CETERA

Pope George & his court ■ Word arrives via the *Washington Post* (April 16) and the *New Republic* (April 23) that President George W. Bush continues to place a high priority on wooing the Catholic vote. Under the tutelage of *Crisis* magazine editor Deal Hudson, pollster and *Crisis* contributor Steve Wagner, and Princeton natural law guru Robert George, Bush is learning "to speak Catholic," if not Latin. "Compassionate Conservatism," for those who don't know, is Latin for "If you believe this, I have 300 acres of Florida chads I'd like to sell you." These three conservative Catholics are members of Bush's Catholic Task Force, which claims credit for helping the born-again Methodist to lure more Catholic voters than any Republican since Ronald Reagan. Regular churchgoing Catholics, the task force claims, are greased and ready to roll into the Republican column in millennial numbers come 2004, bringing with them a profound political realignment. All Bush has to do is to keep mumbling those soothing phrases about the unborn and faith-based initiatives, about "not leaving anyone behind," and how "we must teach our children to be gentle with one another." Apparently that's enough to keep the social consciences of Catholics quiet.

In the meantime, Bush has sent to Congress his wholly disingenuous budget proposal in which tax cuts are designed, like Reagan's budgets, to redistribute wealth to the rich rather than the poor. In the process it guts federal domestic spending on everything from low-income housing to heath care and the environment.

How much more Catholic can you get?

Continuing the Conversation

Theologians in the dock It was a memorable sermon, lacking any clear outline or notable linkage to the Scripture readings. It was a diatribe on the ills of modern Catholicism. The major culprits in this priest's analysis were "so-called Catholic theologians." Since I have spent the last thirty-seven years working as a Catholic theologian, his phrase remains vivid in my memory. Would I ever speak in the classroom or conversation of "so-called Catholic priests" or " so-called Catholic bishops"? No, I would not.

The phrase came back to mind as I recently reviewed the 1999 vote of the U.S. Catholic bishops (223–31) to impose a set of norms that would require those teaching theology to secure a mandate (*mandatum*) from the local bishop. That vote contravened almost directly their 1997 vote (224–6) not to impose the mandate, a vote which the Vatican subsequently rejected.

As I read over the press clippings in my file, I wondered what dark notion readers might harbor about Catholic theologians. What did they think when the archbishop of Philadelphia, Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua—who played a key role in getting the 1999 norms approved—so strongly emphasized that theologians on Catholic campuses must not present their own variant opinions as authentic Catholic teaching (Philadelphia *Daily News*, November 18, 1999)? Is that what folks think Catholic theologians really do? Is that what the cardinal wants parents, who send their sons and daughters to Catholic colleges and universities, to understand? Do they think that their children's teachers really are "so-called Catholic theologians"?

Cardinal Bevilacqua's presumption seems to be that 230 U.S. Catholic colleges and universities are populated largely by a species of Catholic theologians who are charlatans.

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Instead of engaging students with the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church, theologians bamboozle them with their "variant opinions," which, liars that they are, they persuade their students to accept as official Catholic teaching. If the situation conjured up by the remarks of the cardinal were true, it would indeed be a problem.

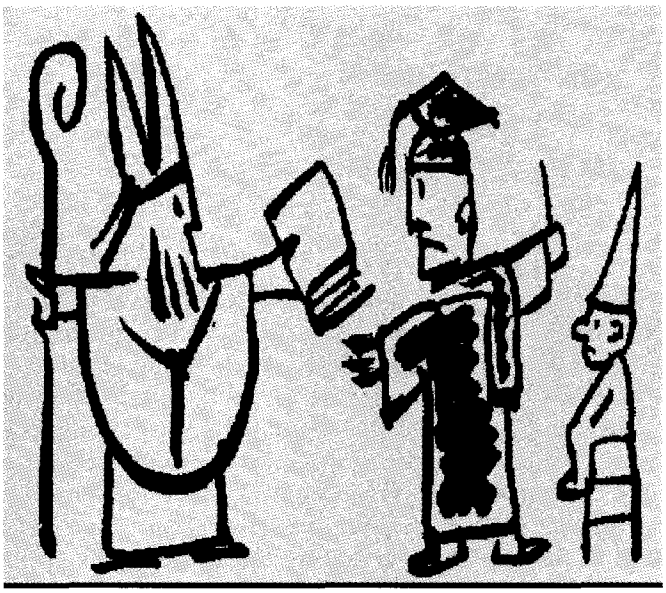
It is regrettable that the cardinal was not called upon to cite concrete and specific examples of such a problem and to document its scope. Were he able to demonstrate the case, he would presumably not have been opposed on the mandate by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, the representative body of all but a handful of the 230 schools. He would not have had the opposition of the Catholic Theological Society of America. He would not have had Archbishop Rembert Weakland call the norms a "pastoral disaster" that would foster vigilantism on Catholic campuses.

In fact, Cardinal Bevilacqua could not have documented such a problem because it does not exist. In thirty-seven years of teaching at Villanova University, and in extensive contact with many other Catholic campuses during my term as president of the College Theology Society, I have found nothing that would square with the problem that his words imply.

What I have found are Catholic theologians who present the authentic teaching of the Roman Catholic church fully and unambiguously, and this by virtue of their own sense of academic professionalism rather than any imposition of authority external to their college or university. Their academic responsibility, however, also requires a competent description of the areas of discussion and dialogue around such teaching. This is offered with humility and with the openness to reason that characterizes the Roman Catholic tradition at its best. They proceed, as did Saint Thomas Aquinas, with a sense that "Whatever is of truth is of the Holy Spirit." Their conviction is that expressed by Pope Leo XIII when he opened the Vatican archives to scholars in 1883, that the church has nothing to fear from truth. "Truth," said Leo, "in spite of the persevering efforts against it will break through and triumph; it may be obscured for a moment, but never extinguished."

There is much more to be said about the new norms, especially about delicate church-state issues and federal funding questions that were too easily dismissed by Cardinal Bevilacqua. On this point alone, a question for him would have been: "Are you confident enough of your position to offer to bail out financially these 230 institutions if you are proved wrong?" The bishops would never play financial roulette with their own institutions as they do with institutions of Catholic higher education.

However unintended it may have been, Catholic theologians have been smeared. That is wrong and un-Christian. Students who attend Catholic colleges and universities will not meet "so-called Catholic theologians"; they will meet theology professors of integrity, competence, and seriousness whose work is vital to the distinctive Catholic identity of these schools.



As implementation of the *mandatum* begins, probably in June, theologians find themselves in an awkward position. Already the vigilantism that Archbishop Rembert Weakland predicted is taking shape with a premature Web site, which lists the names of some two thousand Catholic theologians in the United States and notes whether or not they have applied for a mandatum (see *Commonweal*, March 23 [Editors' note: At the moment, the content of the site has been withdrawn]). A further unfortunate development is the decision of some bishops to simply send the *mandatum* to every theologian in the diocese, increasing the pressure on them to "sign up," rather than apply for a *mandatum*. Vigilantism, which can take many forms, and the aggressive marketing of bishops put pressure on theologians that will be difficult for some to resist. Moreover, these tactics raise questions about the voluntary nature of applying for a *mandatum*.

Many theologians will conclude that this process, which began by smearing them and thus creating a "problem" whose solution is the *mandatum*, and which is now being sold to them under pressure of further smearing, is just plain wrong. With the president of Marquette University, Robert A. Wild, S.J., they are likely to conclude that, "given the fact that most theologians across the country already teach in the way the bishops desire, the *mandatum* requirement seems to be using a sledgehammer to kill a flea." Theologians may well feel that getting on with the important tasks of preserving and strengthening Catholic identity will not be helped by the use of sledgehammers. When they decline or ignore the proffered *mandatum*, remember that they are reflecting the wisdom mirrored in Catholic higher education in recent times, as well as in the bishops' overwhelming 1997 vote not to impose a *mandatum*.

RODGER VAN ALLEN

Rodger Van Allen *is professor of theology and religion at Villanova University. He is the author of* The Commonweal and American Catholicism *(Fortress, 1974) and* Being Catholic: Commonweal from the Seventies to the Nineties *(Loyola University Press, 1993).*

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PAUL BAUMANN

YOU WILL EAT AGAIN

On the front line of the gender wars

Not long ago the business of counting chads and electoral votes in Florida raised the ominous specter of a constitutional crisis. Global warming, we are told, is an impending disaster that may affect every aspect of our lives. George W. Bush, some fear, is an unfolding disaster that may do the same. China, Saddam Hussein, North Korea, Israel, and a host of more obscure "flash points" could conceivably turn our everyday world upside down. And now there is much anxious talk about an economic downturn or even recession.

I am as spottily informed and fiercely opinionated as the next kibitzer about these potential calamities. All of them pale, however, compared to the one conflict that has shaped American life more profoundly than any other for at least the last thirty years. That dilemma, as I'm sure you know, can be succinctly stated: Who is going to take out the garbage?

Political and economic crises come and go. Housework is forever. What should be the proper domestic division of labor between men and women is the anvil upon which God has chosen to hammer into perfection the soul of my generation, and I broach the subject with fear and trembling. It is not a question my mother and father ever asked each other. (Although in retrospect my mother's cooking clearly seems to have been an act of revenge against the patriarchy.) My wife and I, of course, have a perfect understanding on these matters. Perhaps there are minor points of dispute. She has, upon occasion, expressed the opinion that in the twenty years that we've been married, I have "conscientiously avoided learning on what day the garbage needs to go out." That accusation is, of course, little more than a teasing and affectionate complaint. Besides, it's not true. I'm merely a bit fuzzy about which day the garbage goes out.

As it happens, I recently was privy to a discussion between two women academics, one of whom had completed a study on how much housework men actually do. Shaking her head with knowing amusement, the author of the study said that the difference in the amount of housework done by most men and the work done by those men who describe themselves as "feminists" or "Mr. Moms" was—are you ready?—a mere 6 percent.

"I always knew they only talked a good game," responded the other woman.

When I told my wife about this latest news from the gender wars, we both had a good laugh about it. At least I think we both did. As it happens, my wife and five or six other women in our neighborhood linger at the bus stop to talk after the kids have been sent off to school. I encouraged her to solicit the opinions of her friends about the housework study. She did not come home for forty minutes.

According to my wife, all the women laughed, rolled their eyes, and then let loose.

"My husband leaves all his organizational skills at the door when he comes home," said one mother of three. "I used to give him a list of things to do on Saturday morning and he had an anxiety attack. 'I have to do all this?' he says. Now I break it down into three smaller lists so he won't be intimidated. They're so fragile, really."

"Steve thinks that our house is a hotel," said another. "He just comes home to the Merton Street Hotel!"

My wife then brought up the neuralgic issue of "dinner." I must admit that from time to time I do ask, in the most ingratiating way imaginable, what we are going to have for dinner. For some reason my wife sees this as a hostile question, especially if it is asked before noon. She claims that I am "obsessed" with dinner.

The "dinner obsession" actually seems to be rather widespread in our neighborhood.

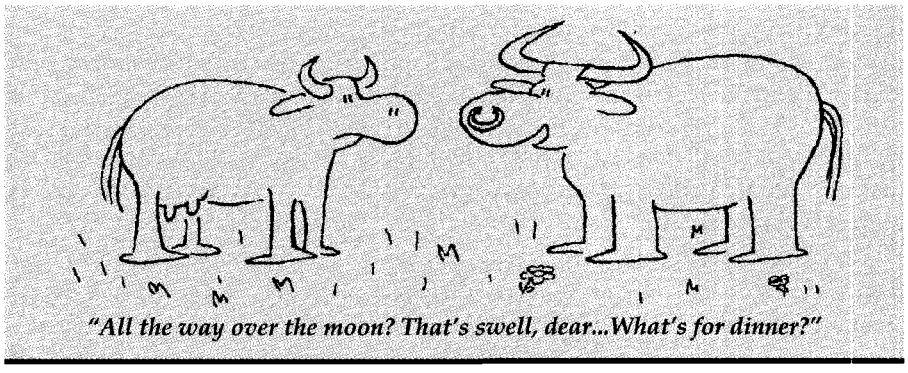
"So does mine!" exclaimed the mother of three after hearing about my dinner questions. "I tell him, 'Don't worry. You will eat again. There will be food.'"

"George will not eat a sandwich for dinner," said another woman. "He expects to be served an actual dinner and he wouldn't know what to do if I put a sandwich in front of him. He believes that since I'm home and he's working, everything is my job."

"What's the use," said another woman with world-weary resignation. "If you send them to the grocery store, they don't come home with anything you could actually make a meal with."

Raised for the most part by stay-at-home moms, my generation of men was imprinted early with certain expectations about...well, mostly about dinner. It will take time and a good deal of behavioral modification to change things. Happily, much of that work has already begun. For example, we've been eating sandwiches for dinner for almost a month now.

The garbage, I have learned, goes out Friday morning. I think. □



"All the way over the moon? That's swell, dear...What's for dinner?"

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JOHN GARVEY

'DIES IRAE'

And don't you forget it

Once I was talking with a woman in our parish who had come from a Muslim background and had been baptized as an adult in her husband's Orthodox Christian faith. It was important for a couple to share a religion, she said, but what really matters is belief in God. I thought for a minute that she would follow this with the standard "we are all going the same way by different paths," the usual bland American thing (although she is Albanian). What she did say surprised me: "I think that I am able to trust a person more if he knows that some day he will be judged."

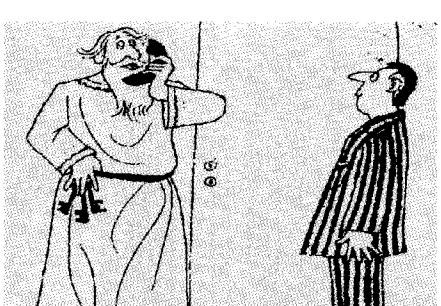
For her a belief in God was tied to a belief in judgment. This is certainly rare these days, even among many who consider themselves faithful believers. The God of popular imagining is less Father than Uncle. And while this may be blamed on many things—on a permissive culture, an overemphasis on unconditional love, etc.—it may also be a reaction against a version of Christianity which too often offered the vision of a God whose rules seemed arbitrary and capricious, a Christianity whose preachers seemed to take more pleasure in thinking of the torments awaiting sinners than the glory awaiting the saved.

Nevertheless, judgment is an essential part of the picture. Although there is a mushy way of representing Christianity as if it were a softer, less harsh religion than the Judaism of the Old Testament (and the mush usually continues by blaming all the bad Christian stuff on Saint Paul), in fact judgment and hell are much more a presence in the New Testament than in all the rest of the Bible.

I do believe that God's love is unconditional. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, God longs for us to repent and will wait for us forever. But God's forgiveness is not unconditional. The Lord's Prayer and what follows in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew make it clear that if we do not forgive we will not be forgiven. Period. No qualification. Similarly, Matthew 25 shows that our eternal fate rests in what we have done or failed to do for others, most particularly the weak and powerless with whom the Lord is identified. This is in unbroken continuity with the tone of the prophets, who revealed God's command that mercy and justice must be shown to the widow, the orphan, and the stranger—that is, to people who cannot return the favor. You have nothing to gain in such an exchange, and so you are like God in his mercy. And if you do not show mercy, you will not be shown mercy.

All religious traditions have a place for the idea that actions have consequences. In most forms of Hinduism and Buddhism this takes the form of karma: The consequences of your actions will be known in the next life, if not in this one, and the fruits of your actions, for good or ill, must be played out completely through the cycle of birth and rebirth, and can be escaped only through extraordinary effort.

Our tradition places a God who is not beyond good and evil at the center, a God who has made us in his image, and who makes demands. Judgment in some central way comes directly from, is *demanded* by, the belief that we are made in God's image. We had no choice in the matter—this is how God made us. That is to say, we are to reveal in our created natures what God is, through compassion and through our efforts toward clarity, our attempts to understand and know our world. We reveal God's image by making and by cherishing. We are responsible for what we have been given, and we will be held accountable.



"Supply? I have here a Mr. Carlson, a former government employee who never took a penny he wasn't entitled to. I'd like you to issue him an extra-large halo with sequins."

We cannot enter into the joy of the Lord without judgment. God's judgment is not the external verdict of a magistrate passing sentence on someone he barely knows. It is the judgment present in our relationship with God as Father: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." This is not just a question of trading one good deed for another. Until we become capable of forgiving, we cannot become capable of being forgiven. We cannot know in its fullness what being forgiven means. And knowing is part of what our eternity means: "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

It may be asked, "What about 'judge not, lest ye be judged'?" This is addressed not to God but to us. Obviously it has to do with the rush to judgment that arises in our hearts when we encounter people who offend us, morally or even physically. (Consider the way some of us react negatively to people who are overweight.) The judgments we obviously need to make—to take a violent criminal off the streets, to arbitrate between quarreling brothers—aren't of this order; but even here we must watch the way we lurch toward judgment. Our judgment often means, to use an overworked and usually unnecessary word, closure—an ending of compassion, the slamming of a door.

Just as the Crucifixion cannot be separated from the Resurrection, so the knowing Paul speaks about in Corinthians cannot be separated from judgment. When the Son of Man comes in glory it will be for a rendering of accounts. We hope, because of what we have seen in Christ, that the judgment will be merciful. But it will *be*. □

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WILLIAM PFAFF

ISRAEL'S MORAL BURDEN

The toll occupation is taking

President George W. Bush and his secretary of state, Colin Powell, have discovered that it is not so simple to walk away from the Middle East.

They have wanted to end Washington's intimate involvement in the search for peace there. Bush has repeatedly said that it is up to the Israelis and the Palestinians to find a way to reduce the violence. And the two sides have been left to fend for themselves.

The president now sees that U.S. ties to Israel are not so easily broken. The United States cannot ignore Israel's recent attacks on Syrian troops, whatever the provocation. Nor can it remain indifferent to mounting communal tension in Lebanon that is directly linked to Israeli-Syrian confrontation. Whatever Israel does to the Palestinians, the United States is held complicitous.

Thus came the secretary of state's reprimand to Israel for last month's raid into Gaza, which he described as an "excessive and disproportionate" response to the Palestinian provocation, a mortar attack on a settlement four miles inside Israel. The president subsequently called Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Israeli forces were abruptly withdrawn after the U.S. reprimand.

Like it or not, after years of virtually unqualified U.S. backing for Israel, that country's acts are taken to be an American responsibility. In this respect, the United States is not an independent actor in the Middle East; its own relations with oil-producing Arab states are, to some degree, held hostage to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.

Most of the people who rule Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States undoubtedly wish this were not the case. They do little enough themselves to help the Palestinians and the Palestinian economy—what remains of it. But they know that they, too, are at risk from the volatile Arab street, where Israel is hated, and from Islamic fundamentalist movements that want Israel and the United States ejected from the Middle East.

Israel is also held hostage—by the Palestinians. It can make war on them, but it cannot win, since there is no authority with the power to surrender. The Palestinians can be punished, confined, and intimidated, but they will still be there.

It is probably true that Yasir Arafat should have accepted the settlement that Ehud Barak, with the support of President Bill Clinton, offered during the final days of the Clinton administration. The Palestinians are unlikely to get a better offer from an Israeli prime minister. But Arafat probably could not have convinced his followers to accept it. And it is even less likely that Barak could have delivered what he offered.

The Israeli public does not yet fully understand the most important consideration of all: The Palestinians are, in a terrible way, winning. Their suffering is morally destroying Israel. It is robbing Israel of its moral substance.

"I'm afraid there is no 'Up,' Sir. There's only 'Down.'"

The more Israel behaves as an oppressor, the less it is worth living in, and the more distant it grows from the ideals upon which it was founded.

Barak's justice minister, Yossi Beilin, said recently that "without the hope for peace, without the endeavors for peace, it will be impossible to maintain a viable Jewish state for long....Those [like Ariel Sharon's followers] who tell us that we cannot make peace with our neighbors bring us Job's tidings."

By occupying and colonizing Palestinian territory to which Israel has no title in international law, but which it holds only through military conquest; by annexing its fertile land and diverting its water; by employing measures of repression that would be unacceptable in any other Western democracy—collective and exemplary punishment, destruction of civilian property to intimidate resistance, arrests without charge, and imprisonment without trial—Israel is turning itself into the kind of state it was founded to repudiate.

Israel was supposed to be a just nation, and it is—but only for Israelis. The Palestinians, meanwhile, assault civilians, carry out indiscriminate terrorist bombings, and utter extravagant imprecations and threats. Their conduct wins them little sympathy in the West. But that doesn't change the fact that they are Israel's victims.

Naturally, they would like to see Israel destroyed. But they might accept simply obtaining what was taken from them in the 1967 war, land that has been illegally occupied and colonized ever since.

Quite possibly, the situation is now beyond that possibility. But Israel has never offered a full withdrawal, and the United States has never broached the idea.

So what future is there for the Palestinians? Perpetuated oppression and suffering. The Israelis face a reciprocal future of perpetuated insecurity, constant tension, and the terrible moral burden that oppressor bears. Israel was never meant to be like this. □

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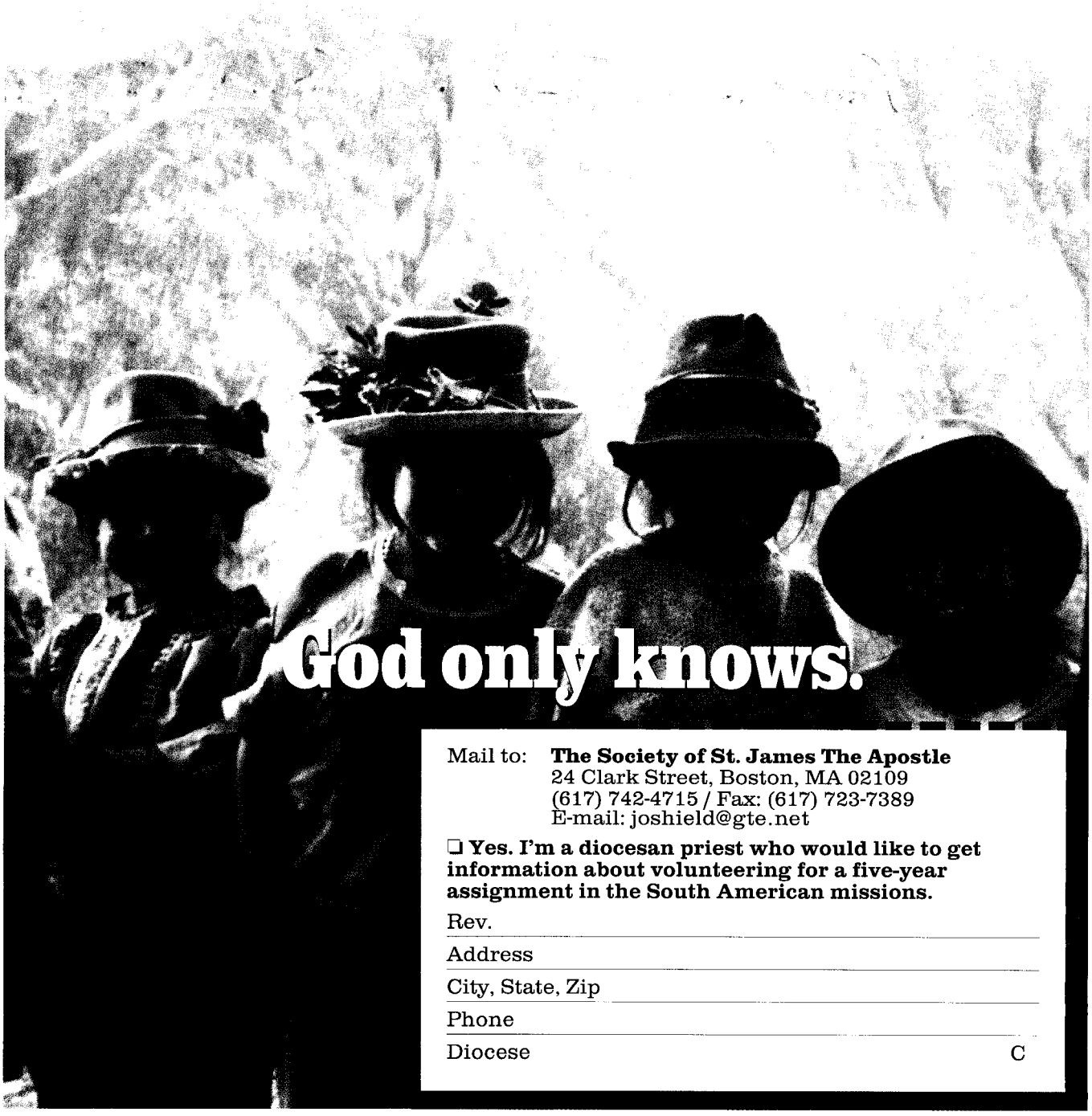

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BEING A WRITER, BEING CATHOLIC

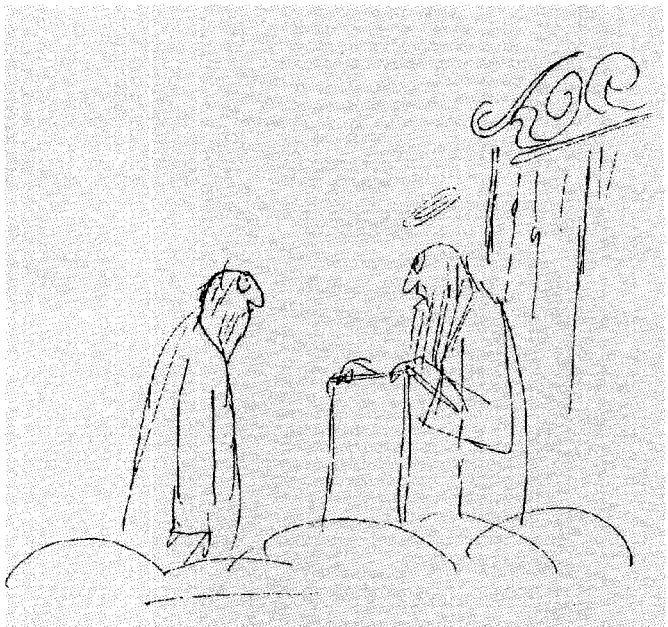
Sometimes the twain can meet

Valerie Sayers

In a recent talk to a group of Catholic writers, artists, and academics, book editor and journalist Paul Elie argued that the most distinctive thing about the contemporary Catholic writer is his or her "aloneness," and that any distinctively Catholic writing must come to terms with that fact. "What makes the Catholic writer feel so fixed in isolation? Why do we feel, each of us, that we are working alone in the dark?" Elie asked. The answer he gave was multifaceted and nuanced, but finally settled on the "nature of writing as much as the nature of American Catholicism today." Writing is first of all a solitary pursuit. The Catholic writer, like all writers, "hopes to make himself or herself understood to one other only. A single convert will do." Contrary to much of the communal rhetoric that attaches itself to the church, such an individual emphasis is not foreign to Catholicism. "The Catholic writer's independence means, too, that this writer can focus on the individual person's struggle with the act of faith," Elie said. "For many modern Catholics, the stumbling block to faith is religion, and even 'the faithful' have to ask themselves constantly whether religion is a way to God or stands in the way of God—if God exists."

My assessment of the problems facing the Catholic writer and my hopes for the future of fiction written by Catholics are slightly different from Elie's, although I do not fundamentally dispute his thesis. Let me begin with a little autobiography. I was raised in the Deep South where Catholics banded together in large raucous groups, the better to flaunt our drinking and dancing in the Bible Belt; I spent a good chunk of my adult life in an equally social parish in Brooklyn, where even our little homeless shelter served as the site of all-night doughnuts and yacking; and I am currently employed by the University of Notre Dame, where I only have to holler down the hall to find another Catholic writer or two. And yet I think Elie's emphasis on the loneliness of the contemporary Catholic and the solitude of the Catholic writer is absolutely correct. Here we are in an age defined, simultaneously, as postreligious and hyper-religious. In such a time every writer is acutely aware, as Elie says, that "the religious question of our time is whether religion itself is legitimate." The very question, perhaps, is enough to make us feel alone.

At my university, as in other religious and political spheres, there is currently tremendous emphasis on answering that question by announcing religious identity repeatedly, by insisting on it. I sometimes worry that the concern over self-identity obscures a far bigger problem. Easy enough to practice identity Catholicism, to *say* I am Catholic, or a Catholic writer; while that sort of name-tagging provides succor and support, as we Catholics in the Protestant South knew, it can also lead to the worst kind of front-pew breast-beating. Far harder to *be* a Catholic writer. Catholicism calls us to reimagine our lives by looking outward as well as inward, by identifying with the poor and the suffering and the least among us, and that is sometimes hard to remember in the comfy little enclaves of Catholicism, whether they be universities or jolly parishes. Certainly it is hard for the writer sitting alone at a blinking computer screen, engrossed in describing this glitzy world of ours in all its hyper- *and* post-religious manifestations. We can all recognize a piece of writ-



"Sorry to reject you, but you lack charisma and a heavenly presence."

Valerie Sayers, *a professor of English at the University of Notre Dame, is the author of five novels. This article is adapted from a talk given at a colloquium on Catholicism and literature sponsored by* Commonweal*'s "American Catholics in the Public Square" project and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.*

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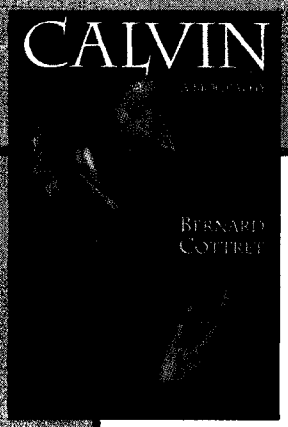

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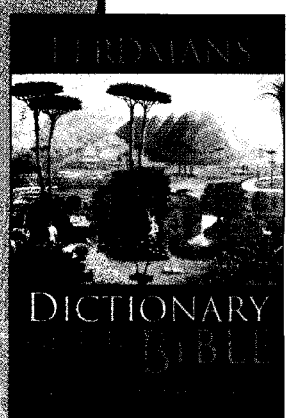

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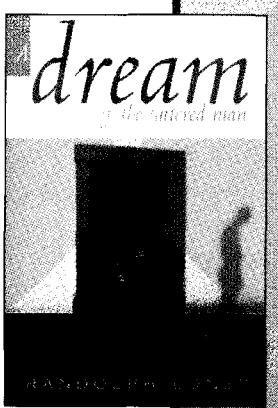

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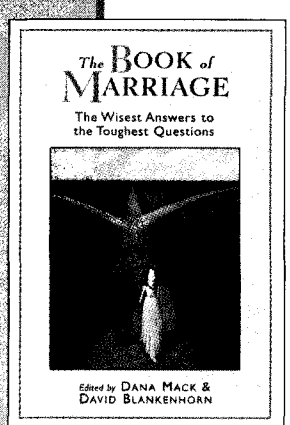

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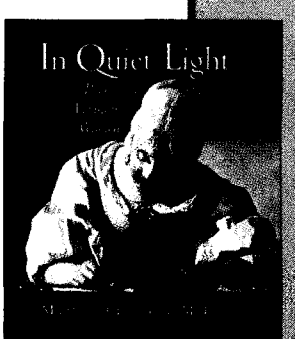

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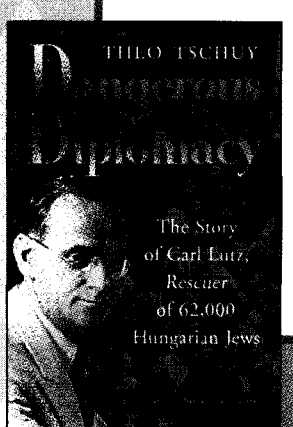

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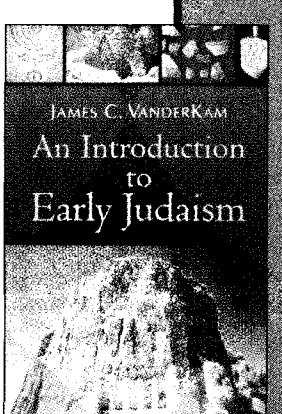

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ing that uses Catholicism as subject, or even as background; far more difficult to define writing that *is* Catholic.

I don't believe that a Catholic writer needs to be writing about explicitly Catholic subjects, but I don't object to the most prickly of them either. I'm all for novels in which Catholicism is a problem, if that is where the writer must dig. It's also fine with me if a novelist chooses a religious crisis or an institutional crisis or abortion or the death penalty or parish scandals or all or none of the above. Writers choose their subjects in pretty much the same way all of us choose our dreams: subjects pursue writers, not the other way around, and often it is the least tasteful and/or the most threatening subject that insists on being explored. That subject may or may not be identifiably Catholic, but certainly a Catholic vision of the world will inform every word a writer chooses. If we aspire to Catholic writing, then we had better let the Gospels propel us. Let me invoke a non-Catholic, Eudora Welty, who says that the act of writerly imagination she holds highest is the act of identification with others: "What I try to do in writing of any character," Welty says, "is to try to enter into the mind, heart, and skin of a human being who is not myself. Whether this happens to be a man or a woman, old or young, with skin black or white, the primary challenge lies in making the jump itself."

This act of identification, it seems to me, is a writerly affirmation of the Gospels and their call to see ourselves in others. Christ's story, after all, is the ultimate act of identification, the narrative of God's willingness to take on human skin. Yet identification is useless if it is sentimental or deluded; writers have to be clear-eyed and they need to achieve that distance we know in literary terms as ironic. Perhaps the greatest danger for a Catholic writer is a projection of a personal spiritual struggle onto the subject at hand. But when a writer is able to simultaneously enter a subject's skin and see the subject clearly, from a distance—even when the subject is the self—then we have some hope of a connection between writer and subject and reader, a link, a shared vision which challenges the writerly solitude about which Elie spoke. Those are connections to be relished. Let me give an example. My eighty-two-year-old mother was hospitalized recently with heart fibrillations; when I called the hospital, she said (with some spirit): "I'll tell you what landed me here. I was reading Flannery O'Connor and boy she really set me off." (I am not making this up.) Naturally I asked which O'Connor she had been reading. "*Everything that Rises Must Converge*," she said. "When they take the grandmother off to shoot her..." She had confused *Everything that Rises* with *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, but she said exactly what she needed to say to me, because it was I who recommended *Everything that Rises*, and that is yet another story in which an older woman dies at story's end. My mother's identification with these old mothers was so complete that her heart went a little wild; I think that would have pleased O'Connor, especially since my mother is one of those readers who not only won't miss the religious significance of the fictional physical crisis, she will take it upon herself. (Besides, O'Connor was uncharacteristically soft about that grandmother the Misfit shoots: "She lacked comprehension," O'Connor said, "but . . . she had a good heart." So, it seems, does my mother.)

Several years ago I spoke to the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs on the subject of the Catholic writer who chooses to portray the church. I ended that address with a little catechism for Catholic writers: Question 1: What is the duty of the Catholic novelist? Answer: The duty of the Catholic novelist is to write a good story. Question 2: What is the duty of the Catholic novelist who chooses to write about the church? Answer: The duty of the Catholic novelist who chooses to write about the church is to write a good story. I stand by those words, however much I recognize the wise-guy tone of my younger self. When the subject is the church itself, Catholic writers open their eyes wide and often find themselves describing—as O'Connor and J.F. Powers and Walker Percy did—the superficiality of much activity described in our culture as religious. We may also see unexpected images of the church: my Notre Dame colleague Sonia Gernes, for example, recently published a story in the *Georgia Review* about nuns on roller skates. Certainly we Catholics may have particular cause to concentrate on the physical, on the body—on the roller skates, perhaps—in our writing. My Protestant friends in South Carolina found it shocking that we kept Christ's body up there on the cross; we wallowed in suffering, they thought. Their own crosses were tastefully empty, the better to concentrate on Christ's triumph and not on his agony. But Catholics insist on the body, on the word incarnate, and that is just as likely to involve a depiction of suffering bodies as it is to involve suffering souls.

But most crucially, Catholic writers write knowing that, as Isaac Babel said, "No steel can pierce a heart so icily as a period in the right place." The Catholic writer's duty is not only to subject but to form: to affect a reconciliation between subject and form, to practice the art with responsibility and delight, to give fully of the writerly self in the service of the work. In that sense, we ask of the Catholic writer precisely what we ask of the Catholic carpenter and nurse and funeral director. There is certainly no guarantee that we as writers will give any clearer demonstration of what it means to be Christ-like than that carpenter or nurse or funeral director will; in fact, there is considerable evidence that writers, like the rich, may have farther to bend. Writing is not a higher calling; many argue that it's not much of a calling at all. The standard coy interview response to the question, "Why do you write?" is: "It's all I know how to do," but for many of us that's the sorry truth. When O'Connor was asked, she said: "Because I'm good at it," and then, she says, she "felt a considerable disapproval in the atmosphere. I felt that this was not thought by the majority to be a high-minded answer; but it was the only answer I could give."

But what, exactly, qualifies as "Catholic" writing? For many years a popular teacher at Notre Dame taught a course

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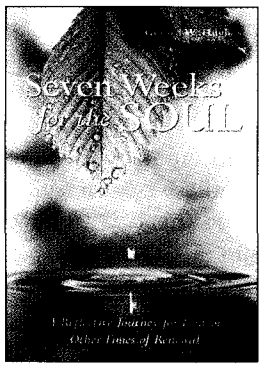

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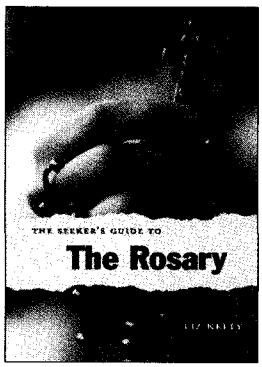

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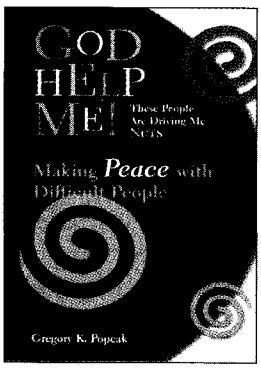

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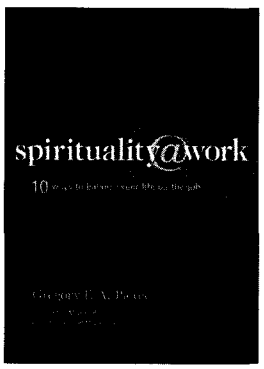

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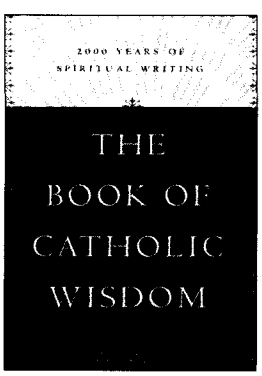

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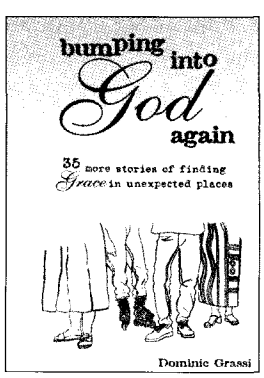

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on Catholic writers whose reading list included Kafka. I think I understand what he was trying to do, and perhaps it's not necessary to be Catholic to be a Catholic writer, but I wonder then how useful the label itself is. There are Catholics who are writers, and there are writers who concern themselves with the church, and the intersection of those two groups sometimes looks tiny, especially since there are so many former Catholics (bad Catholics, we used to say) writing about their institutional experiences. I find that I am a poor guesser about who belongs in what group: when, as a young woman, I first read Muriel Spark, I was astounded to discover that the possessor of that cold eye was a practicing Catholic. Ron Hansen's *Mariette in Ecstasy*, on the other hand, is so reverent a novel that I was certain only a non-Catholic was capable of achieving the distance necessary to describe ecstatic religious experience; that will tell you far more about my own cynicism than it will tell you about Hansen, who is indeed Catholic. Larry Woiwode's great American novel, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, is so suffused with Catholicism that I never would have guessed from its pages that its author would leave the church for Protestantism. The formerly Catholic—and here I think first of Robert Stone, Louise Erdrich, and (I guess) Maureen Howard—show us the church anew, sometimes in terrifying ways, and while it is fascinating to speculate about their current religious beliefs, the speculation isn't nearly as fruitful as the reading itself. Some writers—Tobias Wolff, Mary Karr—hardly give themselves away. In the latest *Best American Short Stories*, Tim Gautreaux, who lately seems to be in the volume every year, has a story about an alcoholic priest and in his commentary mentions his own Catholicism: a delight to discover another from the fold, even though I didn't much like the story. One of the problems with discovering new Catholic writers is the problem with discovering writers at all: the consolidation of the publishing industry, the mega-corporate bodies unwilling to commit to a novel they can't pigeonhole or guarantee to be an eye-popper.

When trying to define Catholic writing it's also impossible not to notice how many self-identified Catholic novelists—Spark, Waugh, O'Connor, Percy, Powers—have been drawn to comedy and how often that comedy challenges the limits of realism, as if our faith itself so challenges the limits of rationalism that realism becomes inadequate as form. I am working my way through the novels of Hilary Mantel, two of which, *An Experiment in Love* and *Fludd*, concern themselves directly with the Catholic experience. I am convinced (again, I'm guessing, and I'm a poor guesser) that Mantel is an ex-Catholic, but in *Fludd* the voice is so driven, the comedy so ecstatic, the form so enticingly close to surreal, that I see her literary connections to Spark and Waugh and I cannot but speculate. We should certainly also keep our collective Catholic eye on Latino and Latina writers—here I think of Cristina García, Junot Díaz, Ana Castillo. They offer us another vision of the way Catholicism makes its presence known in culture, and so too will emerging African and Asian writers.

One thing that a range of Catholic and once-Catholic writers from different cultures reminds us of is that it is a writer's formal impulses, and not just a writer's subject, that lead us to wonder whether Catholicism has a hand at the writer's elbow. For those of us who remember the Latin Mass, the effect of that liturgy on our formal concerns is a given. Among my undergraduate students, who've grown up on some pretty bad so-called folk music, I think I see the effects and I think they're pretty scary. They often include a fake sense of community, a gooey and repetitive blandness of voice that I find utterly depressing. And this is where we come full round to Paul Elie's insistence on the singular act of the writer, because much as we need community—Catholicism is community—the word comes out of one mouth at a time. For the writer the obligation is to make that word precise and pleasurable and challenging and true.

Elie also asked his audience to imagine what a great contemporary memoir of adult Catholicism might be like. I back off a little at the word memoir: the sheer volume of these self-reflections in the last decade or so has been overwhelming. When I think of the great spiritual memoirs, of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, I think of the communities in which they lived, the lice in the Worker houses which Day could use as the contrast to her own life story, the background of monastic life against which Merton could consider his own nonreligious upbringing. Those writers achieved a balance between the time spent looking inward and time spent looking outward. We, on the other hand, are living in the Age of the Self, and it appears to be harder for a memoirist to achieve that. In this age of the first person—look how shamelessly I have used it here—we can hope for a memoir of a spiritual life, but we might, if we are lucky, get other kinds of writing too, writing far stranger. Harold Bloom's whimsical notion that the great writers are also the odd writers seems tailored for contemporary Catholics, whose religion so often looks odd to the culture. If we look for idiosyncrasy from Catholic writers—and I think we should—we might get characters like Charmian Piper in Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*, whose Catholicism is confused and imperfect but nonetheless unwavering and joyful, and not in the least perturbed by divine voices ringing up on the telephone. We might get the moral tales that Eric Rohmer gave us in two forms, story and movie, each unashamed to be Catholic and unashamed to be sophisticated and worldly and witty. We will get, I hope, a surprise, something that is as angular and gawky as *Wise Blood* or as starkly poetic as *Mariette in Ecstasy*, something as hard to believe and as inescapable as the Gospels themselves, something which makes its way to the self through an examination of other lives. I hope we get writing with forms that comment on this computer-video-comic book-virtual reality age of ours. I hope we get writing that does not have to trumpet its Catholicism because it will *be* so Catholic. I hope we get writing created in isolation and loneliness that, as it reaches its readers, achieves communion. □

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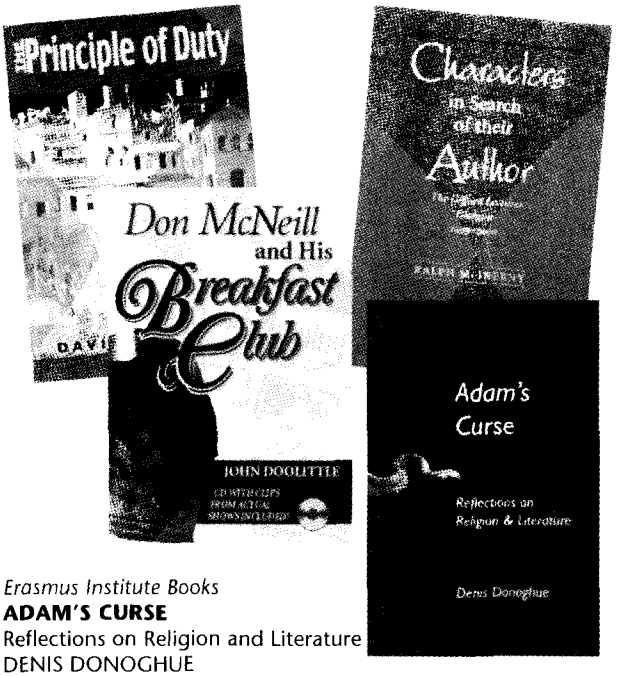

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Movie stars on a stage near you

If you live in a fair-sized city or near one, you will soon be receiving an eye-catching and idealistic brochure in your mail. Eye-catching because it will feature color photos of actors strikingly dressed (or undressed) and caught in highly dramatic postures of combat or lovemaking or emotional confrontation. Idealistic because this pamphlet, dispatched from the regional repertory theater nearest you, lists not only the admirable plays that have been served up in the last nine months but also the equally ambitious schedule in the works for next fall. Perhaps there is a patriotic envoi: this theater is one of your state's chief sources of pride, has been boosted by the governor, and is the recipient of state and national awards. At this point, theater attendance takes on the urgency of socially responsible stock investment.

In other words, your local rep is in big trouble. Always has been, always will be, but it keeps soldiering on with various strategies, including guilt-mongering subscription campaigns to be carried on by phone if that brochure doesn't do the trick. Regional theater, which forty years ago seemed a viable alternative to the financial excess and artistic decadence of Broadway, now comes across as a luxurious tropical flower whose existence can only be maintained by wealthy horticultural aficionados (that is, the monies of patrons or cultural foundations) and skillful cross-breeding (that is, Broadway producers sometimes back a repertory production, then take the show over after a short local run and bring it to Broadway).

Yet regional theater survives, even if it never quite thrives, and, even more miraculously, continues to fill the huge gap left by the theaters, Broadway and off-Broadway, of New York. And what is that gap?

Let us look at the "Goings On About Town" theater section of a recent *New Yorker*. There we find, in the "Long Run" section, several expensively mounted musicals, a ticket to any of which will cost you the same amount of money you spent on your child for a semester of college. But, if you flip to the "Opened Recently" section, you will discover quite a different sort of fare:

- *The Gathering*: "Will Power's one-man show..."
- *Stones in His Pocket*: "In Marie Jones's comedy...Sean Campion and Conleh Hill portray all the characters."
- *Cartas: A Nun in Love*: "A stage adaptation of correspondence translated and performed by Myriam Cyr."
- *High Dive*: "In her one-woman comedy, Leslie Ayvazian...gives audience members the opportunity to read minor roles from their seats..."
- *I Will Bear Witness*: "A stage version [that is, a one-man reading] of the diaries of Victor Klemperer..."
- *Momma*: "In her one-woman show, Siobhan Fallon..."
- *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*: "Lily Tomlin is back on Broadway in the one-woman, thirteen-character show..."

And this is just a partial list. Because of a desperate economics that I won't try to grapple with here, New York theater is gradually narrowing itself to two sorts of entertainment: the million-dollar musical and the sawbuck monologue. The big casts, huge sets, and computerized lighting tricks of Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals and the Disney entertainments (*The Lion King, Beauty and the Beast*, etc.) are gambles of big bucks in the hope of making huge fortunes, while the one- and two-actor shows are a minimization of costs designed to make a small profit, which will then be invested in the next minimalist theater piece.

Of course, there are also plenty of new plays opening with the usual medium-sized casts. Some of them (*Wit* immediately comes to mind) are superb, but even these shows try to hold down costs by having their actors walk through invisible settings waving invisible props.

What's conspicuously absent most of the time from New York is the full-scale, handsomely visualized production of multicharacter classic plays. 'Twas not always so. In fact, aside from the great musicals and the rare sensational dramatic premiere (*Streetcar, Salesman*, etc.), the real newsmaking New York productions from the twenties to the early sixties were the big revivals of classics: the Guthrie McClintic productions starring his wife, Katharine Cornell—*Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, The Three Sisters* (which *Time* featured as its cover story during the final year of World War II when news of Allied victories was competing for print space); Michael Cacoyannis's record-breaking off-Broadway staging of *The Trojan Women* starring Mildred Dunnock; Judith Anderson and John Gielgud in *Medea*; Orson Welles's innovative revivals of *Julius Caesar, Macbeth*, and *Dr. Faustus*; the Lunts and Uta Hagen in *The Seagull*; Katharine Hepburn in *As You Like It*; Ruth Gordon in *The Country Wife* and *A Doll's House*; Eva LeGallienne in *Hedda Gabler*; two (count 'em—two!) competing Broadway productions of *Hamlet* with Gielgud's melancholy Dane facing off against Leslie Howard's. The list goes on and on. The yoking of star power with classic text produced the sort of full-blooded entertainment that stayed in people's minds for decades and became, literally, the sort of show they told their children about.

The current absence of this sort of American theater has created a remarkable artistic vacancy, and it is to the great credit of local repertory theaters that they try to fill this gap. They not only regularly present the classics but flesh them out in largish productions complete with substantial sets and, when necessary, lots of bodies on stage, since local, nonprofessional actors can be drafted at little expense. (Frank Langella's New York production of *Cyrano*

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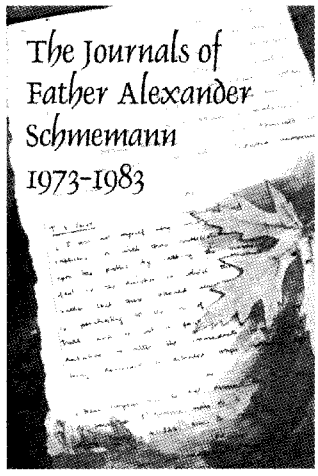

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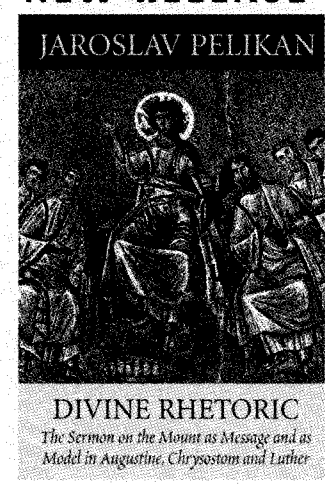

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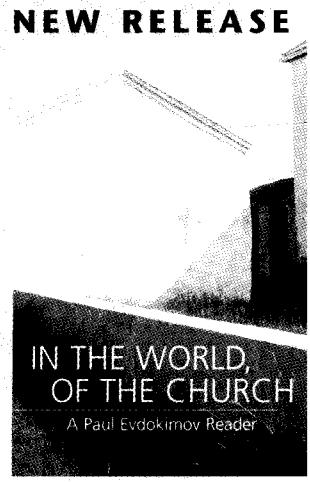

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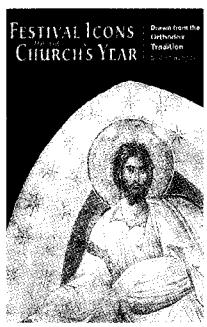

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de Bergerac eliminated the all-important crowds in the dueling and battle scenes. This would never have happened in a reputable local rep production.)

Admirable. But what's missing from the repertory theater picture? Stars. Well, so what? Are stars so important? Shouldn't we rather rejoice at the absence of overpaid celebrities?

In an interview he gave many years ago, Laurence Olivier spoke of theater as "the glamorization of thought," which remains the best definition I know of what theater, specifically the classic theater of highly charged language and outsized characters, does. When outsized actors aren't available to embody the tremendous visions of certain playwrights, when there's no actor of Olivier's electricity to communicate Shakespeare's vision of jealousy in *Othello*, when an Eileen Atkins isn't on hand to incarnate Shaw's idea of incipient Protestantism in *Saint Joan*, when it's not Jason Robards conveying the full blast of O'Neil's bleakness in *The Iceman Cometh*, the thought immanent in the text does not truly surface. It's commonly believed that musical comedies and lightweight plays are the venues of glamour while sheer dogged seriousness is enough to convey Sophocles and Shakespeare. Just the opposite is true. I've seen amateur productions of musical comedies in which much of the charm of the piece came across even though glamour was totally absent from the cast. But if you've ever seen even a good production of *Lear* with only a journeyman actor on hand to howl imprecations at the heavens, you probably had a very boring time. Without glamour, masterpieces shrivel.

The movies drained much glamour from the stage. We never got to see Marlon Brando's Hamlet or Meryl Streep's Beatrice or Robert De Niro's Iago. But what the movies stole, they may yet give back. Now that the studios cater to ever younger audiences with ever younger stars in ever goofier vehicles, actors (especially the distaff members of the profession) are considered over the hill at thirty-five. Unless they're willing to humble their talents in character parts in movies, more and more major talents may turn back to the stage. If they still want to play the great stage roles they've always dreamed of, it is likely they'll be willing to negotiate with the better regional companies to do the very plays that provide the real star-power roles: the classics. This is already happening. For instance, the Hartford Stage Company's recent commitment to reviving the work of Tennessee Williams has attracted the services of Rip Torn and Elizabeth Ashley. It is too early to call this a trend, but if so, it is a case of "back to the future": it was common practice in nineteenth-century theater for stars like Edwin Booth on tour to perform with local theater companies. In the musical world, this remained common practice; there's nothing unusual in Andrea Boccelli or Plácido Domingo appearing with the Pittsburgh or the Santa Fe Symphony, or Christopher Plummer performing his one-man *Henry V* show with the Hartford Symphony playing William Walton's music as accompaniment. Why shouldn't the theater world follow suit? And if the stars mitigate the perpetual financial woe of the reps, all the better.

Until they do, our culture will continue suffering a very tidy, limited lobotomy. Only one lobe of its imaginative life has been removed and the patient is doing very well, thank you, ambling along pretty much as it always has. But am I mistaken in thinking that a certain intellectual glint in the eyes is gone? For what is a culture like without the glamorization of thought? □

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Ratcatcher opens with a slow-motion close-up of a child spinning around in a lace curtain, and it's unclear at first whether we're seeing rapture or torture, suffocation or play; there's beauty here, the image announces, but harm as well. Scottish director Lynne Ramsay's gritty debut film takes place in a 1970s Glasgow housing project that a lengthy sanitation strike has left overrun with garbage and rats—"notorious vectors of disease," a TV news spot puts it. The environment is one of menacing poverty, a world of scabbed and filthy plaster, boarded-up windows, and a disused canal running along one edge of the project. Danger lurks; and when two boys roughhouse in the murky water, one of them drowns, leaving the other, twelve-year-old James Gillespie, with a burden of horror, bewilderment, and guilt.

Days later we watch James (William Eadie) foray back into the water, to where the bottom drops away and his friend disappeared. He's trying to fathom cause and effect, to understand where tragedy comes from and where it leads; and the attempt soon encompasses his entire life. It's as if he is seeing things for the first

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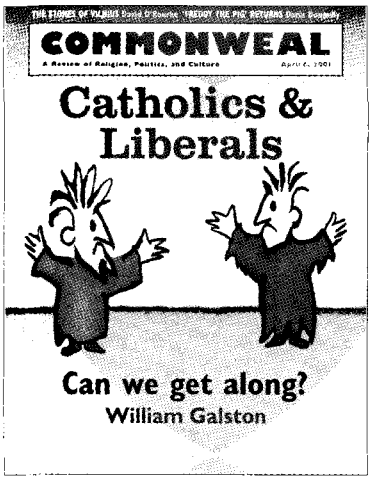

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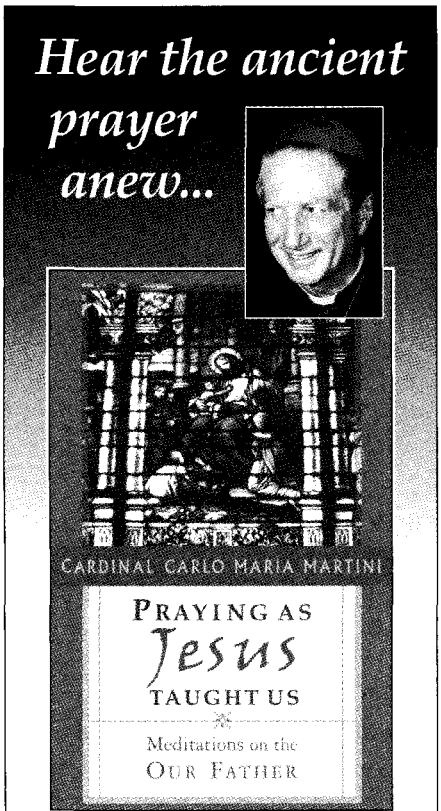

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—from the Introduction

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time, through the eyes of loss. His father drinks. His teenage sister may be sneaking off to meet someone. The older neighborhood boys practice pointless cruelty upon animals and gang sex on a passive fourteen-year-old girl, Margaret Anne (Leanne Mullen). Adulthood is a state of failure and lethargy, and family fun on a Saturday night means watching the old man make a drunken pass at your Ma while Tom Jones gyrates on the telly. Pitilessly Ramsay zeroes in on the child's view, focusing on the spindle of drool that hangs from Dad's mouth as he passes out on the couch, bringing a Polanski-like touch of the grotesque to the portrayal of James's estrangement.

This is a terse and lonely movie, assembled out of images that lodge themselves with stubborn beauty in the mind's eye. That you could take the dialogue away and still have the essence of *Ratcatcher* is a tribute to Ramsay and her director of photography, Alwin Kuchler, whose camera makes seemingly innocuous images speak volumes. When James tries to retrieve Margaret Anne's glasses, tossed into the canal by the toughs, he can't quite reach them, and the failure suggests a childhood in which every saving gesture falls short. Another day, James hops a city bus and rides it to the end of the line, a field out in the country where new housing is under construction. Workers have gone home for the day, and James plays at the deserted site—first as laborer, hoisting a few shovelfuls of dirt, then homeowner. Venturing inside, he stares in awe at the gleaming fixtures; he pees in the new toilet (not yet connected!), and lies down with a sigh in the gleaming tub. Back outside, he romps through a neighboring wheat field, the image beautifully framed through the bathroom window.

Short on plot, long on character and atmosphere, *Ratcatcher* is a dark portrayal of urban childhood, tinged with pathos. Some of the best scenes take up James's budding friendship with Margaret Anne. Drafted as a lookout while the older boys have at her, he feels the sympathy of a fellow outcast, and the two gradually forge an affection that is the closest thing to love in *Ratcatcher*. It is Ramsay's brilliant insight to have a friendship begun amid drastic sexual degradation find novel forms of intimacy, as when James combs the lice out of Margaret Anne's hair ("That's the wee beast there," he enthuses, holding out the comb—"See it?"). In the film's most affecting scene, the two sneak a bath together at her parents' flat. Soaping each other up, naked and giggling like mad, they're in a nether world between childhood and adolescence, their jolly, giddy play graced with an unconscious awareness of sex. It is an astonishing moment, one that rescues innocence and restores the girl to her childhood; and American viewers can't but feel a passing despair that such a scene—both the idea itself and the logistics of filming it, with young actors—is all but unimaginable on this side of the Atlantic.

A coming-of-age film that charts the advent of death, sex, and the fallibility of parents, *Ratcatcher* treads well-trafficked ground. But Ramsay manages to make it new, investing the ugly with fascination and the mundane with a glow of joy. We're used to seeing an anonymous new suburban development as an emblem of ennui, for instance, but here we encounter it transformed into paradise, the gleaming porcelain bathroom a bower of delight in the eyes of a child for whom cleanliness is a fantasy. As James, first-time actor William Eadie belongs right up there with Haley Joel Osment in *The Sixth Sense* and Anton Glanzelius in *My Life as a Dog*, to name two of my favorite child performances. Because children's emotions are so often nonverbal, films of childhood need a face. Eadie has one, all right: His angular visage is all wariness and hurt; he looks malnourished and scared, and tragically adult.

I haven't seen so bleak a portrayal of childhood since *Pelle the Conqueror;* and yet—unlike *Pelle*—*Ratcatcher* isn't determined to make you weep. It's too austere for that, too interested, in an almost clinical way, in human nature; when we see kids clamber up, laughing, to look into a hearse, their wholly amoral curiosity turns death into a game. Often appalling, *Ratcatcher* resists being heartbreaking, and its detachment comes off

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as a strength. It makes you look where you don't want to, and captures a way of seeing that keeps coming back to you, hours and days later, like a dream. In the end, Ramsay pushes her film's grim determinism a bit too far—further, anyway, than I wanted her to. But even a gifted young filmmaker needs something left to learn.

Space forbids spending much time on *Series 7: The Contenders*, Daniel Minahan's frenetic parody of reality-based television. And how much time would you really want to spend? It's bad enough having the shows themselves. (Actually, it's alarming to note that a parody of "Survivor" can score points without one's having ever watched an episode of the original: that's how saturated the mainstream media are with this stuff.) Minahan's spoof mixes "Survivor" with live police shows, like "Cops," then takes the concept to its absurd extreme. "Real people in real danger," is the bold motto of "The Contenders," "where the only prize is the prize that counts—your life!" Contestants are armed, then unloosed to hunt each other across the malls and living rooms of suburban America. Tonight's cast of killers? A nurse, an elderly curmudgeon, a spoiled teenage girl, an unemployed asbestos-removal worker, a moody artist, and our current champ, Dawn (Brooke Smith), a pregnant woman whose bouts of tearful reluctance yield to bellicose trash-talking come trigger time.

Complete with cheesy music and breathless voice-over—"Will Dawn be able to eliminate Jeff—or will her feelings for him get in the way?"—*Series 7* plays off its blatant violence against the squishy intimacy of contestant interviews that elicit the full range of therapytainment: distraught confessions, screaming bouts with siblings, heartfelt testimonials to one's own inner strength ("My faith has seen me through," says Connie, the nurse, shortly after blowing away another contender with a high-powered rifle). We watch the achievement-crazed parents of the teenager ferry her in their SUV to her target's house, help with her bulletproof vest, and urge the kid on: "This guy's an easy mark, honey. Now just go in there and do some damage!" (A casting note—that's New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's estranged wife, Donna Hanover, as Mom, screaming "Got your guns? Go, go, go!")

Satirizing a TV show is harder than, say, satirizing rock musicians (*This Is Spinal Tap*) or dog owners (*Best in Show*); and the, um, scattershot humor of *Series 7* misses as often as it hits. There's a basic problem when the reality you're targeting is reality TV. As I sit down to write this, tonight's news is recapping a lawsuit against an MTV reality show ("Jackass") on behalf of a boy who emulated one segment's stunt of covering himself with raw meat and barbecuing himself, along with a second lawsuit—for "emotional distress"—by two girl contestants who claim they were "mooned...and later spattered with feces" during the taping of another show, "Dude, That Sucks!" And you say you want to do parody? □

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Celia Wren

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

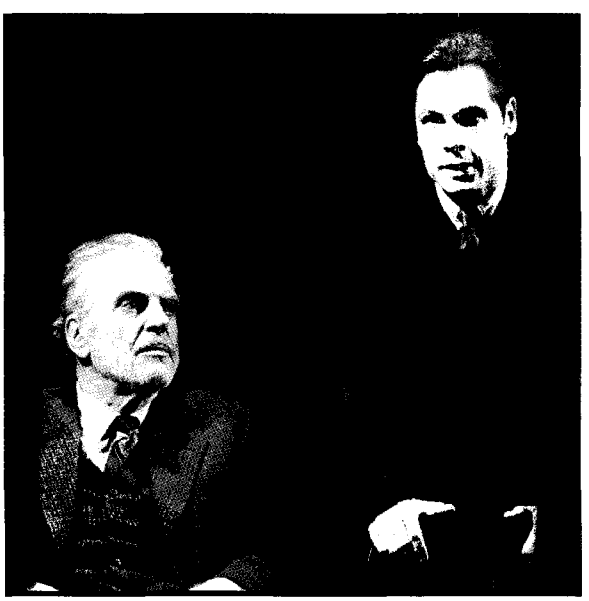
'Judgment at Nuremberg' & 'Trappists'

The dry ice is the first bad sign.

In the minutes before the house lights dim at Broadway's Longacre Theatre, current home of the new play *Judgment at Nuremberg*, wisps of the artificial smoke slither out from behind an intimidating onstage tableau: a mammoth Third Reich eagle and a swastika, suspended in front of a blood-red scrim. Pure, unadulterated atmospherics, the tableau is the first of the many unnecessarily manipulative moments that freight the show, the inaugural stage production of Abby Mann's four-decade-old teleplay (and, later, screenplay) about the trial of Nazi war criminals. We hear the unnerving thud of soldiers marching goose step; we watch historical footage of the execution of Nazi leaders; we contemplate glowing sepia photos of Holocaust victims. *Judgment*'s creators, it seems, do not trust us to respond to the play's disturbing themes in the right way, at the right time. And so, with no thought for subtlety, they have loaded the production with shock-value effects—and snippets of clunky dialogue—that emphasize the material's *gravitas*.

But do we really need dry ice to tell us that solemn events are underway in *Judgment at Nuremberg*, heretofore best known as the 1961 Academy Award-winning movie starring Spencer Tracy and featuring Marlene Dietrich, Judy Garland, and Burt Lancaster? Set in 1947, the story follows the trial of Ernst Janning, an elderly German judge who has sullied an otherwise eminent record by collaborating with the Nazi regime. When Judge Haywood, an unsophisticated American jurist, arrives to preside over the court, he finds himself knocked off balance not only by Richter-scale ethical questions, but also by seismic shifts in the international landscape—with the cold war lurching into motion, the American military is anxious to finesse the sentencing for the sake of creating European good will.

Is Janning culpable of legitimizing Nazi law? Or was he simply living up to his responsibilities as a judge? If he is guilty, are other Germans—like the glamorous Madame Bertholt, who befriends Haywood—guilty too? And moral issues aside, should Haywood and his fellow judges mitigate their verdicts in view of the Soviet threat to Berlin? The movie *Judgment at Nuremberg* (itself based on a TV drama that premiered in 1959) tempered its scrutiny of such weighty questions with magnetic psychological portraits. In particular, the quicksilver charm and fury of Maximilian Schell, as Janning's young defense attorney Oscar Rolfe, gave the legal deliberations a fascinating human center, while Spencer Tracy's aw-shucks persona as Haywood discreetly lightened the mood. Despite its Herculean 190-minute length, the Stanley Kramer-directed movie couldn't but entertain, no matter how much thought it provoked.



Judge not?

The same cannot be said of the play. Blame does not lie with the cast, which includes, in a much-publicized coup, Maximilian Schell; having scored an Oscar forty years ago for his portrait of Rolfe in the movie, the actor now plays Janning with persuasively grim authority and a grizzled beard. Michael Hayden, the play's Rolfe, tends toward a mannered opacity, but George Grizzard is a winner as the self-deprecating Haywood. Fidgeting with his hat and edging shyly into conversations, Grizzard fulfills the role's dramatic function more effectively than Tracy did—you always knew that Tracy could handle the challenges of the Nuremberg courtroom, whereas Grizzard seems fragile and fallible, qualities that might ratchet up suspense, did the production's portentousness not preclude any.

Instead, we get a kind of theatrical hand-wringing that always feels too prepackaged to have any real connection to our lives. The point of Abby Mann's script is to stress how wrenching and morally perilous the act of judgment is when it is not abstract. Haywood's sojourn in Nuremberg is agony because he can't coast into a paint-by-numbers verdict—because he learns that there is good in Janning; because the Allies, too, have inflicted suffering; because politics encroach on the courtroom; because he has to at least entertain the possibility of collective guilt. The ordeal should prompt us to reflect that we, too, are always muddling through ethical reality. Identifying with his dilemma, we should endure a little pity and terror.

As directed by John Tillinger, *Judgment* makes a token gesture of implicating us in the script's morally complex universe: when not lit up with the faces of Holocaust victims, the mirrored walls of the courtroom reflect the audience. But superfluous special effects work against moral immediacy—or any im-

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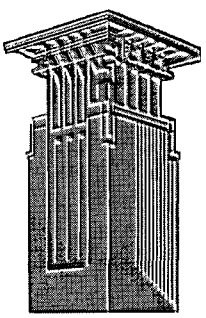
mediacy—by giving the show a celluloid feel. The play's creators have utterly failed to capitalize on the *this-is-happening-here-and-now* quality that is the theatre's trump card. In fact, given that entire scenes have apparently been cut-and-pasted directly from the forty-year-old screenplay, one can only conclude that no one associated with the production bothered to think through *Judgment*'s viability as a play, and that's a muddle all its own.

While Ernst Janning was in the dock on Broadway, in early April, a different kind of trial was underway in a Lilliputian theater next to a comedy club, about two miles uptown. Inspired by Michael Mott's biography of Thomas Merton, Joseph P. Ritz's *Trappists* probes the final months, and the posthumous reputation, of Thomas Hogan, a Cistercian monk whose brilliant writings have earned him international fame but not inner peace. The play jumps back and forth between two narratives—Hogan's tortured love affair with a young nurse, and, many years later, the hostile encounter between the monastery's abbot and a hard-bitten female journalist seeking the dirt on Hogan's life.

Although both pairs of characters interact in situations of unusual intimacy—Hogan (Wayne Markover) and the nurse, Susan (Frances Sherman), treasure stolen moments of privacy; the journalist, Meredith Mallory (Alice King), is the first woman ever to enter the abbot's private office—all four are aware they are acting in the courtroom of public opinion. As if wrestling with their own consciences weren't anguish enough, Susan and Hogan have to consider future damage to the church: were Hogan to renounce his vows, he would disillusion the new believers he's won over through his writings. And Meredith, a lapsed Catholic outraged by the church's attitude toward women, is on the lookout for guilt. "Journalism is sometimes a modern form of the Inquisition," the abbot (R. J. Lewis) complains as he deflects her questions. "It has a priesthood that sometimes performs a great deal of cruelty for the sake of a greater good."

Directed by Marvin Kaye, the Open Book Theatre Company's bare-bones production lets the intelligent script speak for itself; with set and costumes pretty much stopping at a couple of cowls and a *"Pax intrantibus"* sign, you had to concentrate on the words. But that was a rewarding task: working around Susan and Hogan's extraordinarily moving love story, Ritz weaves together insights into faith, fame, personal responsibility, and the limits of human knowledge, giving his play a satisfying intellectual heft.

Lashed to its shoestring budget, *Trappists* fleeted through New York, playing for only two weekends (the script will appear in *Incisions*, an Open Book anthology forthcoming from Stage & Screen Book Club). But anyone who managed to catch both it and *Judgment at Nuremberg* had a sobering, double-barreled opportunity to reflect on what it means to pass judgment. As both plays show, the accused are never the only ones on trial. □



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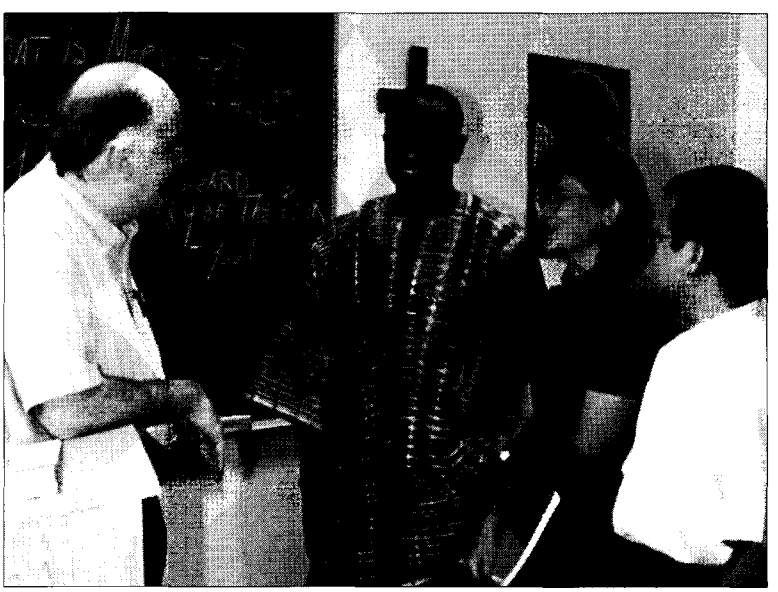

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Beyond authority

Moral Freedom
The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice
Alan Wolfe
W.W. Norton, $24.95, 215 pp.

R. Bruce Douglass

The idea that individuals should be allowed to make up their own minds about matters of right and wrong is not new. A high regard for individual conscience has been a part of Western culture in one form or other since at least the days of Socrates, and it has been particularly influential since the advent of modernity. Advocacy of such freedom has figured so prominently in modern thought, in fact, that it is almost appropriate to regard the acceptance of moral autonomy as one of the defining elements of what it means to have a modern outlook. But it is one thing to affirm such an idea and quite another to adhere to it consistently in practice. Even in societies like the United States that have long prided themselves on their commitment to individual liberties, the ideal of freedom of conscience has often been compromised in practice. Over the course of modern history the advocacy of such freedom has routinely been combined with beliefs and practices that were in tension, if not outright contradiction, with it. So the same people (Kant, for example) who argued eloquently that individuals have a right to decide things for themselves also insisted that everyone has a duty to comply with the dictates of one or another moral authority.

The more radical implications of the idea of moral freedom have been slow in being realized. In our time, says sociologist Alan Wolfe in this new book, this has begun to change, and it will change even more dramatically in the years ahead. The old sources of authority (churches, families, neighborhoods, economic elites, civil authorities, etc.) that once strongly influenced people's thinking about right and wrong are losing their ability to do so. A situation is emerging in which individuals are free to decide such matters for themselves. The more people do so, the more they can be expected to assume that they have a right to decide for themselves by what standards and ideals they will live. This is a revolutionary development, Wolfe contends, and it will drastically change our way of life.

Most moral and social thinkers have not been comfortable about where such moral autonomy will lead. Wolfe concedes that our changing notions of moral freedom could have adverse consequences. But he is optimistic about how we are handling our freedoms. Having devoted much of the last decade to a series of empirical studies designed to clarify the current moral condition of middle-class Americans, Wolfe is convinced that, at this stage at least, the people of this nation are responding reasonably well to the challenge. This does not mean, of course, that he approves of everything that has happened since the old authorities lost credibility. But he disagrees with those who think that nothing but harm can come of this development. He insists, against conservative critics, that the matter is complex. The more one knows about the ways in which ordinary Americans handle the moral issues they confront in this new situation, the more evident that complexity is.

For it is just not the case, Wolfe argues, that Americans today are any less serious than previous generations about living morally responsible lives. Nor is it true that the old (bourgeois) virtues are being abandoned. Americans today tend to be somewhat less doctrinaire about their views on moral matters. They are also inclined to be more respectful of beliefs and practices that differ from their own. But that does not mean that they have no standards or are much less concerned about whether the values they espouse are observed in practice. If you make any serious effort to find out what the people actually think about matters

"Don't worry lads, I won't ask you to do anything I wouldn't do myself."

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of right and wrong, it soon becomes evident, says Wolfe, not only that most individuals want to live good lives, but that they continue to uphold many of the old middle-class values as well. This is especially true of such values as loyalty, self-discipline, and truthfulness, which are clearly important to the effective functioning of modern institutions.

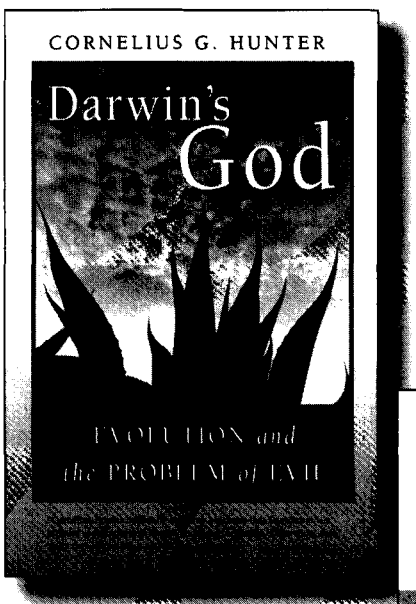
The difficulty, however, is that people tend to be wary of making the standards they claim to uphold into "absolutes." They insist on bending the rules as "circumstances" dictate. Loyalty is said to be a good thing in principle, but not at the price of unhappiness in a bad marriage. Similarly, honesty is the best policy, but not if telling the truth inflicts unhappiness on others. And so on. Much of Wolfe's book is devoted to analyses of the fate of particular virtues, and what this inventory shows is that Americans now tend to uphold the old virtues in principle while in practice turning them into "options" that have little real capacity to compel compliance.

It is easy to be cynical about a morality that so obviously avoids requiring anyone to do anything costly, but Wolfe is not. He is at pains to put the best face on what his data reveal. He accepts the premise that the changes in mores he documents are not only necessary but also desirable. "Americans are not going to lead twenty-first-century lives based on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century moral ideals," he says. "They will not subject themselves to the severe and demanding tests of character imposed on individuals by one or another version of the Protestant ethic. But that does not mean that the morality by which people now live makes them soft. It means only that the new morality is different, making up in the bewildering array of temptations it must face what it lacks in rigor and unswerving self-confidence."

Wolfe is a serious thinker with a generous spirit, and the grace of his prose makes it easy to accept his description of the moral landscape as the obvious truth of the matter. But surely his conclusions beg the very questions at issue. For what is a morality that can accommodate people's desires in almost every situation if not a recipe for "soft" thinking about moral issues? The fact that this morality must cope with a "bewildering array of temptations" hardly makes up for its lack of rigor and self-confidence. If anything, such a circumstance calls for more rigor, not less, and the lack of it only makes it more likely that people will find it difficult to resist the temptations in question. It is reassuring, admittedly, to learn that Americans still want to have lives that are moral as well as free. It is understandable that certain adjustments in anachronistic moral codes be made. But in the absence of a stronger sense of morality as the fulfillment of duties, it is difficult to see why such a process of revision will not produce just the complacent self-indulgence that has been the fear of those who have resisted the idea of moral autonomy all along. □

R. Bruce Douglass *teaches government at Georgetown University.*

CHALLENGING THE CONCLUSIONS



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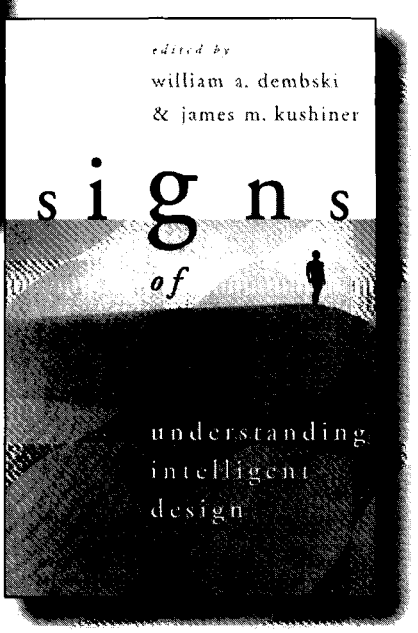

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FREE TO DO WHAT?

An interview with Alan Wolfe

Paul Baumann

Alan Wolfe is professor of political science and director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. A frequent Commonweal *contributor, Wolfe's most recent book,* Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice, *is reviewed on page 26. Executive Editor Paul Baumann conducted this interview with Wolfe by e-mail.*

■ PAUL BAUMANN: Is there a two- or three-sentence definition of "moral freedom"?

■ ALAN WOLFE: Moral freedom occurs when individuals are expected to determine for themselves what it means to lead a good and virtuous life. They decide what is right and wrong, not by bending their will to authority, but by considering who they are, what others require, and what consequences follow from acting one way rather than another.

■ BAUMANN: Your new book paints a generally positive picture of the moral decision making of contemporary Americans and describes a notion of "moral freedom" that conflicts with many traditional ideas about the nature of moral truth. The Catholic tradition, for example, teaches that "true freedom is a capacity to do not only what we wish but what we ought." You write that the new moral freedom is "a challenge to be met, not a condition to be cured." How can it be met without abandoning the most basic assumptions of the older moral traditions?

■ WOLFE: There are, I think, two separate issues here that ought not to be conflated. Moral freedom means that people want to play a role in determining the truths by which their lives will be governed. That is not the same thing as saying that there are no truths by which behavior ought to be governed. The way most Americans think about these issues, at least as I understand what they are saying, should not be described as "postmodernist" or "relativist." It is quite possible that a person can claim the right to participate in the discovery of a truth and still hold that the truth he or she discovers ought to be considered universally binding on all.

It is for this reason that I describe moral freedom as a challenge to be met. In my research, I find that Americans are seriously engaged in moral inquiry. They do believe in God. They understand the importance of traditions. But they have also learned to be skeptical of moral authority, at least in part because those who lead institutions of moral authority—the state, the schools, and to some degree the churches—have violated their trust. I see them longing to be reconnected to those institutions, but only after the institutions do something to overcome the distrust that people have.

Although ordinary Americans do not often read philosophy, theology, and history, they also know that traditions change. All religious traditions, including Catholicism, have adapted to new realities. People thus wonder why this should not continue.

■ BAUMANN: You note that traditional sources of moral authority such as religion, the state, the family, etc., no longer serve as authoritative guides for individuals. What moral resources do people draw on in lieu of these traditional institutions? How are these resources to be sustained in a world where individuals are the final arbiters of morality?

■ WOLFE: This question raises many of my own personal concerns with the emergence of moral freedom. As a teacher, for example, I find myself quite old-fashioned. I do not believe that students can just read what they want when they want and get a good education. The self-help books that people read in such great quantities are not, I believe, adequate guides to the actual complexities of balancing the needs of the self with one's obligations to society. Duty and obligation are thus slighted in an era of moral freedom, one of the most significant prices we pay. Still, I come back to the question of what we are expected to do about it all. And I again insist that to reestablish a strong conception of duty, it is not enough to preach from a holier-than-thou position.

■ BAUMANN: Americans, you write, want to make up their own minds about moral responsibility. Sociology, on the other hand, has developed a strong critique of such an individualistic conception of knowledge. Aren't the choices Americans make—and even the high value Americans place on choice itself—strongly influenced by economic power or powerlessness as well as by other social forces? Don't we need to be more explicit about what constitutes the "good" if we are not to be manipulated by, rather than master of, this new moral freedom?

■ WOLFE: To be sure, choices can be manipulated. But I think that intellectuals can be guilty of assuming that any choices people make that are not the ones intellectuals think they should make are wrong choices. We have seen this happen frequently in the way intellectuals talk about suburban lifestyles or consumerism. All that said, there still is good reason to talk about the good. My colleague David Hollenbach is writing a book on the common good which I await with great enthusiasm. A morally free people will have some say in what the common good is—all the more reason for those who think about these things full-time to offer ideas and suggestions.

■ BAUMANN: With its emphasis on individual, egocentric decision making, moral freedom would seem to be a poor basis for a politics directed toward the common good. Won't the new moral freedom make it even more difficult for Americans to recognize society's obligations to the poor and to those who cannot help themselves?

■ WOLFE: The Catholic church has been for some time now one of the strongest voices for the proposition that we have an obligation to the poor. The emergence of moral freedom does make it more difficult for people to listen, although Americans have always been somewhat resistant to income redistribution or the welfare state even when moral freedom was not much of a force. So my answer to your question is that this work must continue, no matter how difficult the task. □

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WHY THE DANE WAS MELANCHOLY

Hamlet in Purgatory
Stephen Greenblatt
Princeton University Press, $29.95, 314 pp.

Edward T. Oakes

My spiritual director tells the following tale: Several years ago a Jesuit seminarian was appearing in a college production of *Hamlet* and gave this "ghostly counselor" (as spiritual directors used to be called) complimentary tickets to see the play. As he left the theater, my ghostly counselor (an apt title that, considering the plot) said to his companion, "What a *Catholic* play that was!" For what struck him immediately as a playgoer new to *Hamlet* was how much the plot hinges on the taken-for-granted realities of purgatory, confession, automatic departure to hell for suicides, and the like.

In effect, Stephen Greenblatt's latest book *Hamlet in Purgatory* has taken on the challenge of defamiliarizing the most famous play in Western literature by placing it in its proper theological setting. Because many critics and directors have imposed on *Hamlet* a Freudian Oedipal interpretation, modern readers and theatergoers have tended to lose sight of the true matrix of the tragedy, the only setting that allows it to make sense: the framework of Christian, specifically late-medieval Catholic, eschatology.

Greenblatt's astonishing work of historical reconstruction, however, in no sense wishes to take its place with those scholars who recently have been trying to claim Shakespeare for Catholicism. Greenblatt's purpose is not so narrowly biographical or confessional, which should not be surprising in a scholar known as the *doyen* of the New Historicists. This school of literary criticism grew up largely in reaction to the earlier predominance of the so-called New Criticism. New Critics such as John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren, insisted that all literary works, especially poems, were self-contained artifacts ("well-wrought urns") that existed independently of their respective authors and could thus be interpreted without any reference to the author's life or psychology.

An inevitable reaction to such extremism was bound to set in. On one side, vaguely deconstructionist critics like Paul de Man and Stanley Fish stressed the inevitable tensions in any text that prevented one single authoritative or "hegemonic" reading. But simultaneously another school was emerging, New Historicism, which insisted that no text could ever be understood outside of its historical context. Heavily influenced by the New Left Marxism of the seventies and eighties, the New Historicists were tempted to attribute all literary greatness to heavy-handed social forces of dominance, oppression, patriarchy, and other such demons in the postmodern *Confessor's Manual*.

Only lately has a reaction to that exaggeration made itself felt. Critics like Harold Bloom and Frank Kermode have both recently published books (reviewed in these pages) either lamenting the New Historicism (Bloom) or at least insisting that the time has returned when the critic must advert more to the poem itself so as to convey to the reader the text*ure* of the text (Kermode).

I rehearse this history of twentieth-century literary criticism to highlight the remarkable nature of Greenblatt's achievement. For while he must definitely rank as the most influential and knowledgeable of all the New Historicists, he now shows himself in this book as something more, much more. Early on, he seems to admit the justice of

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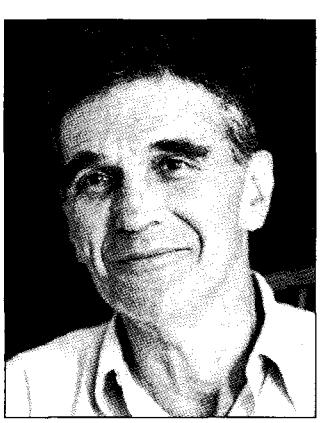

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Bloom's and Kermode's anxieties when he allows that his only aim is to immerse himself in *Hamlet*'s "magical intensity." "It seems a bit absurd," he goes on to say, "to bear witness to the intensity of *Hamlet*; but my profession has become so oddly diffident and even phobic about literary power, so suspicious and tense, that it risks losing sight of—or at least failing to articulate—the whole reason anyone bothers with the enterprise in the first place."

But despite that concession, Greenblatt is at heart a historian, and so he almost immediately adds: "I believe that nothing comes of nothing, even in Shakespeare. I [want] to know where he got the matter he was working with and what he did with that matter." And he frankly admits that at times his interest in the historical background gets the better of him, so that he almost has to yank himself back to the play. Fortunately, all the author's digressions pay off. For when he gets to *Hamlet* itself in the last chapter, Greenblatt has taken the reader on a *tour d'horizon* of remarkable fascination and erudition, setting out all the anxieties about the afterlife that beset the medieval mind. Greenblatt is right: the material he has excavated fascinates in its own right. Medieval penitential manuals, accounts of ghosts from purgatory, scholastic analyses of the church's celestial "treasury of merit" at the disposal of the pope, and, above all, lurid depictions in illuminated manuscripts of suffering souls undergoing purgative torments (many reproduced as plates and halftones here)—all of this makes for absorbing reading.

Nor must the reader ever forget that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* around 1600, that is, at a time when the Catholic cause in England would by no means have seemed so forlorn as finally became obvious in John Milton's day. In a way, that uncertainty about Catholicism's fate was Hamlet's own tragedy too: born in the Lutheran country of Denmark and shipped off by his father to study in Luther's own university town of Wittenberg, the Prince of Denmark could no more rid himself of his Catholic worldview in Lutheran Elsinore than could Shakespeare in Eliza-

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bethan England. No wonder Hamlet's whole world seemed to him to have gone awry! Something *was* rotten in the state of Denmark; and that dry rot was being caused by the collapse of Catholic eschatology under the ferocious and relentless assault of Protestant divines. (Greenblatt makes clear that no Catholic doctrine—not the Real Presence, not the primacy of the pope, not Mariology—so roused the ire of Protestant polemicists as did the doctrine of purgatory.)

Thus, Greenblatt disputes those interpretations that hold that the ghost is not Hamlet's father but a demon come to tempt the prince to a deed evil in itself. Instead, he insists that Shakespeare is clearly signaling both the genuineness of the ghost and its provenance when it admonishes Hamlet to "remember me," which is standard liturgical language for remembering the souls in purgatory. Thus when Hamlet says, "conscience doth make cowards of us all," he is not bravely refusing to violate the moral law against revenge and murder, but is violating the dictates of justice by yielding to the temptations of a Protestant conscience.

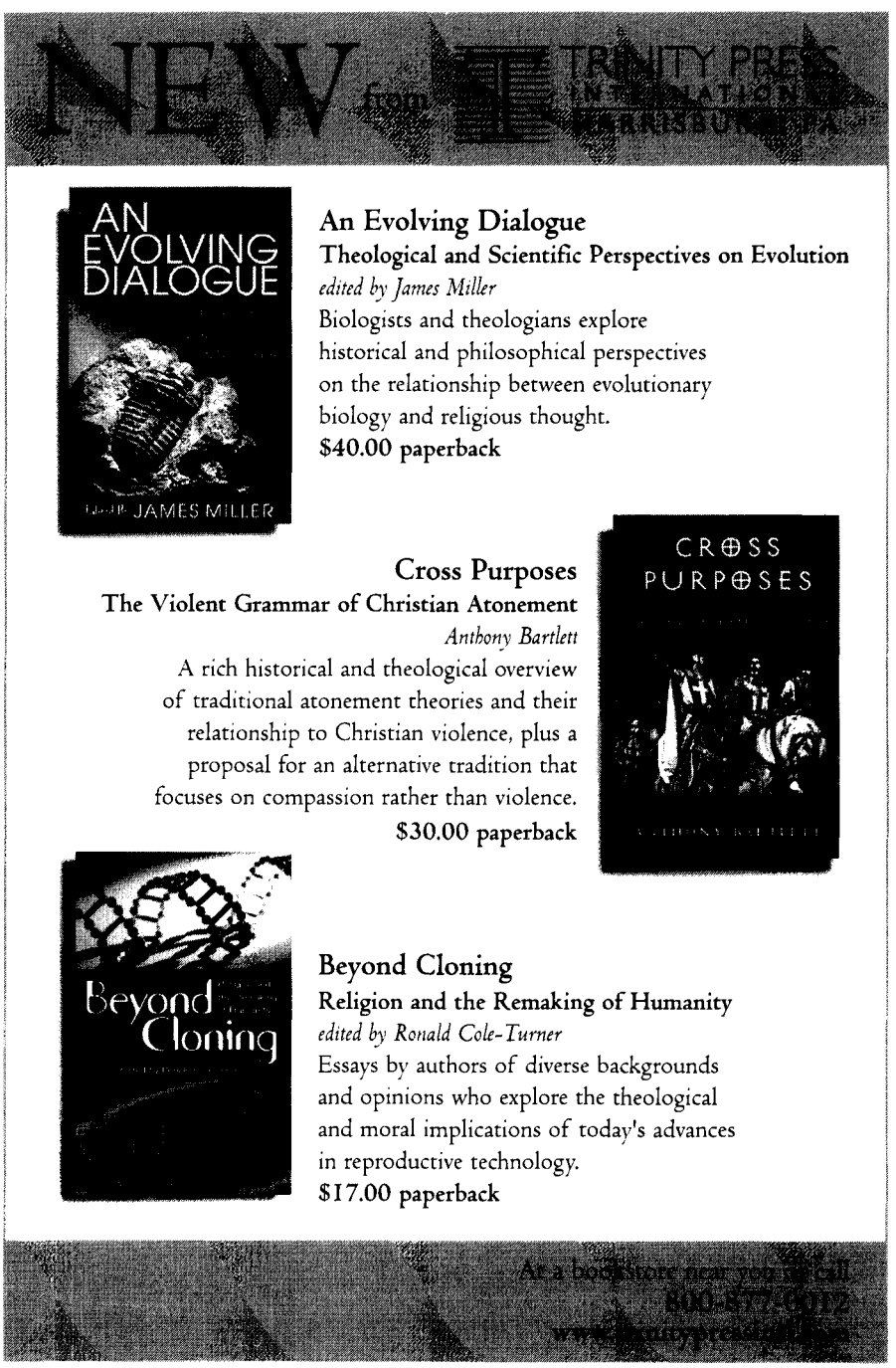
What are modern readers to think of all this, whether they be believers or not, Catholics or Protestants? What is the ecumenically sensitive Christian to make of a Catholic *Hamlet*? Greenblatt's answer is quite arresting. As he rightly points out, to rob the faithful of the premise of purgatory is thereby to relegate a deeply felt experience to the realm of the irrational and inexplicable:

> Anyone who has experienced the death of a close friend or relative knows the feeling: not only the pain of sudden, irrevocable loss but also the strange, irrational expectation of recovery. The telephone rings, and you are suddenly certain that your dead friend is on the other end of the line; the elevator door opens, and you expect your dead father to step out into the hallway, brushing the snow from the shoulders of his coat. These are not merely modern feelings; in fact it is startling that we continue to have them so vividly, since everything in the contemporary world works to suppress them.

That work of suppression began with Luther's protest and was already well underway by 1600. In a sense, for Greenblatt the Elizabethan theater ended up filling the void left by the expulsion of purgatory from England's official religion—as Shakespeare well knew. In fact, Shakespeare made the purgatorial role of theater explicit at the end of *The Tempest* when Prospero turns directly to the audiences with this farewell:

> Now I want
> Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
> And my ending is despair
> Unless I be relieved by prayer,
> Which pierces so that it assaults
> Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
> As you from crimes would
> pardoned be,
> Let your indulgence set me free. □

Edward T. Oakes, S.J., *has just translated Josef Pieper's* The Concept of Sin *(Saint Augustine's Press).*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OF STONES & STORIES

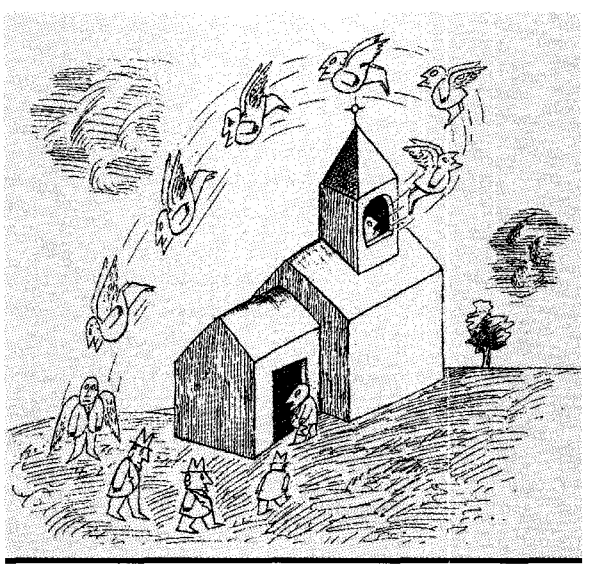
The Geometry of Love
Space, Time, Mystery, and Meaning in an Ordinary Church
Margaret Visser
North Point Press, $27, 262 pp.

Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill

Every reader of Margaret Visser's new book—and may there be many—will be able to pinpoint the precise moment when he or she gets hooked. For me, the moment came in chapter 2, where a discussion of sacred space in ancient Rome became an extended meditation on the Hebrew exodus from Egypt and Solomon's construction of the great temple at Jerusalem. For another reader it may be the reflection on the symbolism of the number eight, or the comparison of a visitor's descent into a church with Aeneas's descent into the underworld in book VI of the *Aeneid*. In *The Geometry of Love*, it's one tangent after another.

As the subtitle indicates, Visser's inspiration arose out of her frustration at the lack of information that was truly revelatory, as opposed to merely factual, in the many churches she has visited. Seeking more meaning, she chose an "ordinary" church, Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura (Saint Agnes Outside the Walls) in Rome, and learned everything she could about it. Readers familiar with Visser's acclaimed *Much Depends on Dinner*, a brilliant essay on the social meaning of eating, will recognize the technique.

A classicist by training, and a relentless researcher, Visser draws on a breathtaking array of disciplines—architecture, history, folklore, theology, anthropology, and etymology, among others—as she takes the measure of Saint Agnes's. The book's subtitle seems slightly disingenuous: a thirteen-hundred-year-old church built over the tomb of a young virgin martyr in Rome, brimming with statues, mosaics, and portraits, may strike most readers as anything but ordinary. (How well, one wonders, would her method apply to a truly ordinary church, say, a sparsely decorated post-Vatican II circular church in a midwestern suburb?) Still, as its title suggests, the book's organizing principle is the church's architectural space. Each chapter corresponds to a different part of the building: crossing the threshold into the narthex, we make our way through the constituent elements of the structure, concluding our tour at the tomb of the virgin martyr for whom the church is named. To read the book is to experience the church, visually and physically, as a visitor would.



One of Visser's most likable qualities is her willingness to follow her curiosity wherever it leads. She is an erudite and chatty tour guide venturing off on a new angle of discovery every few paces. Take chapter 5, for example, on the apse (although any chapter would do). Visser begins with the tangible—the mosaic of Saint Agnes flanked by two papal companions—goes on to the obvious topic of the history and technique of mosaics, but also includes Christianity's appropriation of the myth of the phoenix, the history of haloes in religious art (these days, she comments, "We are far more interested in feet of clay than in aureoled heads"), and Thérèse of Lisieux's girlhood visit to Saint Agnes's, during which she pocketed a fallen mosaic stone. There's more: a concise and informed summary of the Monophysite controversy that divided East and West in the seventh century, a brief history of palliums, an account of Pope Honorius's building projects, and a final reflection on the light and life conferred on the world by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Even the footnotes are gems: number 15 points out that palms were not native to Jerusalem but imported for the Feast of Tabernacles.

None of this is random, of course; *The Geometry of Love* is nothing if not beautifully constructed. Rather, each new topic arises effortlessly out of its predecessor. It makes perfect sense, for example, that a discussion of the placement of the baptismal font should lead to reflection on the need for Christian forgiveness. In her breathtaking display of scholarly prowess, Visser never loses her pilgrim's footing. Indeed, some of the best writing interweaves architecture and object with matters of the spirit. Not surprisingly, the author of *Much Depends on Dinner* is quite good on the Eucharist: "It is as food and drink—the object for human beings of endlessly renewed desire, necessary, simple, ordinary, to be broken and shared, of external matter that becomes internal, and which then turns into the very substance of the eater—that the Christian God of love sacramentally gives himself to human beings." Here is not only knowledge, but something rarer—true understanding.

Visser rejoices in the smallest of details—the fact that two popes died of colds they caught at Saint Agnes's, or an eighteenth-century Anglican clergyman's con-

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viction that the alabaster statue of Saint Agnes behind the altar was in fact a statue of the Greek god of revelry, Dionysus. She has a gift for enlivening ordinary things with meaning, such as her vision of a row of columns "striding through space." An inveterate etymologist, she discloses the origins of words in an always illuminating way. Who knew, for example, that the term "curfew" originated in the French *couvre-feu*, or the "covering of the fire" mandated by the final ringing of the town bells at night in the Middle Ages? Or that "narthex" takes its name from the Greek word for "fennel stalk," commonly used as a container in the ancient Mediterranean world?

As Visser approaches the tomb of Agnes, neatly construed as the book's conclusion and the church's beginning, she observes, "A church labyrinth...is not like the Cretan one: what potentially awaits us here is not a monster, but an epiphany." Above all, this is a book of epiphanies, of meanings revealed. It is a repository of information and fact, just as the tomb of Agnes is a repository of the saint's bones. But like the saint's grave, which is both a gateway to eternal life and historically the seed of Saint Agnes's itself, *The Geometry of Love* confers new life on everyday things, transforming our experience not only of this particular church but of all churches. □

Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill, *co-author with Joseph Papp of* Shakespeare Alive!, *is a frequent contributor.*

MRS. ROOSEVELT'S OPUS

A World Made New
Mary Ann Glendon
Random House, $25.95, 384 pp.

James Finn

The language of human rights is so ubiquitous in political discourse today, so readily invoked in even minor cases, that anyone born in the last half of the twentieth century might be excused for thinking it has long been so. It has not.

The path to our present emphasis on human rights has been long and often tortuous. It has been said that the passage from medieval to modern times has been marked by a shift of emphasis from duties to rights. But, as Mary Ann Glendon notes, the modern language of human rights stems from towering documents of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the 1689 British Bill of Rights; the 1776 U.S. Declaration of Independence; the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. To this distinguished lineage she would add the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN document whose progeny are the human rights movements, treaties, and constitutions around the world that are suffused with its principles.

A World Made New is the story of an important chapter in both the life of the United Nations and of Eleanor Roosevelt. The author asserts that when, on December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights without a dissenting vote, "the moral terrain of international relations was forever altered." A large claim! She also says that it is hard to imagine the declaration could have been brought to that state without the work of Mrs. Roosevelt. Although of a different order, that is another large claim.

From the first glimmerings of the idea of human rights in the UN Charter to its actual conception and final parturition in the declaration, it had to face indifference and hostility. Nor, it should be noted, has the increased stature of the declaration quelled the attacks or eliminated deep reservations. The document remains the stuff of debate and dissension. Mary Ann Glendon has undertaken to chart the passage of the declaration as Mrs. Roosevelt helped guide it through a UN maze that was mined with power politics, personal conflict, cultural differences, and long-held national animosities. To this daunting task Glendon brings an impressive array of talents. She has written prize-winning books on international law and cross-cultural issues, and she led the Vatican delegation to the Beijing Women's Rights Conference in 1985. She is a master of exposition and description, with a ready ear for a telling anecdote.

Her story begins in the mid-fifties when, after the devastating carnage of two world wars, many small countries and numerous humanitarian and religious groups called upon the great powers to fulfill their wartime rhetoric of equality and freedom. The great powers were focused on collective security; it was as a concession, a sop, that they consented to a peripheral project regarding human rights. It would not touch on matters of national sovereignty. Or so thought the leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, France, and China.

Mrs. Roosevelt's rise to an ascendant position in the deliberations was fortuitous. President Harry Truman urged her to be a member of the U.S. delegation to the UN. Recently widowed and emotionally bereft, she had to overcome her own diffidence and the active opposition of both Republican and Democratic leaders. Her hard work and diligent preparation won over her critics, and she was asked to serve on the UN committee devoted to social, humanitarian, and cultural affairs. She guessed that she had been assigned where she could do the least harm, but she soon found that she was called upon to debate the formidable Andrei Vishinsky. Her winning performance dissipated any remaining doubts about her political acumen and her value to U.S. interests. When, subsequently, the Commission on Human Rights was instructed to prepare an international bill of human rights and the means to implement it, Mrs. Roosevelt served as chairman. According to Glendon, Roosevelt was one of four who were most crucial to the formulation of the declaration, the others

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being Ping-chun Chang, a Chinese philosopher and playwright; Charles Malik, a brilliant young Lebanese philosopher; and René Cassin, winner of the Nobel Prize and a legal pillar of the Free French.

The body of Glendon's book is the close reading of the arguments and events that led finally to the completed declaration. Some of the questions: How and by whom will the Bill of Rights be implemented? What is the relation between the individual and the state, and which is paramount? What is the distinction between state and society and what are the consequences of that distinction? What is the relation between political and civil rights and social and economic rights? Can the implementation of human rights infringe on national sovereignty?

The world's constitutions and treaties had been gathered and experts from different cultures and countries had been consulted. Their efforts were distilled into a list of rights followed by more than four hundred pages of commentary. Through a process of accommodation, discussion, compromise, confrontation, rancor, and collegiality, these were resolved into a declaration with a preamble and thirty articles. Glendon credits the many off-the-record social gatherings initiated by Mrs. Roosevelt for facilitating the process. And she makes a convincing case that, because the world outside the UN was becoming increasingly dangerous, if the declaration had not been completed and approved when it was, it would have been decades before it would even be attempted.

Although Glendon writes about the Universal Declaration and Mrs. Roosevelt's part in its passage with large sympathies, she is anything but utopian about its future. She acknowledges that there are large gaps and internal tensions in the document. More serious, though, are the problematic readings it has received. Soon after it was completed, the president of the American Bar Association said it would "promote state socialism, if not communism, around the world." Versions of that charge are still being made. Almost equally damaging in Glendon's eyes are those who rip single articles from the declaration to use as political clubs, destroying the organic unity so deliberately designed by the authors. She also faults those who read the document as if it were designed to express a single way of protecting human rights. Rather it was intended to provide a large general standard that could be incorporated in different cultures, under various conditions. Power and interests are constants in political life and are not destined to disappear, but if we follow the course Glendon directs us to, reason and conscience—to use her terms—may counter misguided power and interest and give the lie to the harsh dictates of *realpolitik*. Mary Ann Glendon has accomplished brilliantly her declared purpose. □

James Finn *was the United States representative at the UN's first international conference to consider freedom of religion and belief (Geneva, 1984). He was also a participant at the UN's conference on human rights held in Vienna in 1993.*

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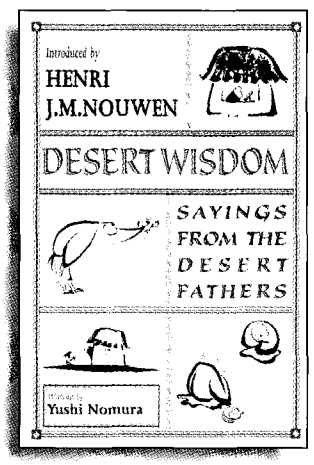

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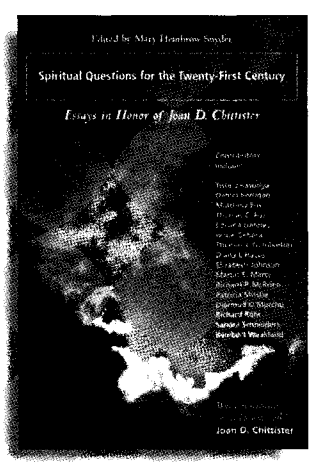

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WHAT HATH BARRY WROUGHT?

Before the Storm
Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus
Rick Perlstein
Hill and Wang, $30, 671 pp.

Kevin Mattson

The mystic chords of memory operate in odd ways. Think 1960s, and you probably think of hippies, riots, student revolutionaries, the Great Society, and liberalism triumphant. But why shouldn't Barry Goldwater's rise to the head of the Republican Party, Ronald Reagan's resounding defeat of Pat Brown for the governorship of California, and Richard Nixon's appeal to the "silent majority" in his presidential victory in the-crash-and-burn year of 1968 epitomize the decade? Why liberalism, not conservatism?

Perhaps it's because academic historians are just a bunch of "tenured radicals" who hate the victories of the Right. Though a caricature, there's something to this. After all, as the historian Alan Brinkley once pointed out, those who cut their teeth in the 1960s New Left lambasted cold-war and "corporate" liberals more than the Right. Now many New Left historians write our histories. Besides, any upright historian must find it difficult to enter a world populated by fundamentalists and the John Birch Society.

Rick Perlstein has come to the rescue by writing an important book that explores the ascendancy of American conservatism. It is no surprise that it took a member of Generation X to do this. Perlstein was born in 1969; I presume his earliest political memories (like my own) were mostly about Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton (the latter, though a Democrat, seemed more like a Republican at times). To many people today liberalism appears in tatters, and Perlstein is ready to tell why. Having earned his penmanship in journalism rather than academia, he harkens back to old-style "narrative" history—telling a story and telling it well.

The story is Goldwater's rise to the presidential candidacy in 1964. At stake is the definition of the Republican Party—most clearly symbolized in Nelson Rockefeller's attempt to drive Goldwater barbarians out of the sacred party of Lincoln. Rockefeller represented the Eastern stalwarts, those who liked their country clubs clean. Goldwater labeled them the "Republican establishment." This Western senator was too libertarian for centrists like Rockefeller. Indeed, Goldwater famously suggested that the government "sell the T.V.A.," one of the central linchpins of the New Deal, a system that Eisenhower had already made peace with. When Rockefeller divorced his wife and took another, cultural conservatives as well as libertarians started to embrace Goldwater. Rockefeller reeked of elitism and slackish values.

Though Goldwater stood at the helm of this rebellion, Perlstein makes clear just how much stood behind him. It is useful to be reminded that Goldwater kept refusing to run, no matter how many people tried to persuade him. The Arizona senator's strength is in part seen in the cast of characters who ran against him—Lodge, Romney, Scranton, and Rockefeller himself. Down they went, each one of them. And responsible for each loss was a movement of dedicated conservative activists. Behind Goldwater was the owner of Knott's Berry Farm pumping in the money, and there was Ronald Reagan who, acting or not, could put a smiling face on Goldwater's otherwise steely message.

Then there were the intellectuals. This story has been told before, but in the context of the Goldwater campaign, its significance heightens. Prime here was William F. Buckley Jr., the famous Catholic intellectual who had already excoriated his alma mater, Yale, for secularism. Founding *National Review* in the mid-1950s, Buckley made conservatism intellectually respectable. Interestingly, he watched Goldwater's rise with doubt. To a roomful of campaign workers, Buckley warned: "Any election of Barry Goldwater would presuppose a sea change in American public opinion." In his warning of impending loss, Buckley made clear that the eventual outcome of Perlstein's story—LBJ's electoral landslide over Goldwater—mattered less than long-term changes in ideas.

In answering why Goldwater failed, Perlstein provides little that is new. Everyone knows Goldwater suffered from a case of loose lips. Reading his gaffes again is still enjoyable. My favorite is when, on national television, Goldwater was asked about countries falling to communism. He explained that they were

"Stop whimpering!—You want to grow up to be a liberal?"

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"going to go through the same period of growth that the United States did, when we spent 110 or 112 years experimenting with socialism and communism and egalitarianism and monarchy and everything else, arriving at our constitutional republic."

During the campaign, Goldwater looked increasingly foolish. He grew enamored with portable nuclear devices that American officers could carry around and set off against the Soviets. He became famous for bellowing: "I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty—is—no—vice!" Perlstein suggests interesting intersections between politics and popular culture, how movies like *Seven Days in May* and *Dr. Strangelove*—portraying maniacal military leaders bent on world destruction—helped put the kibosh on Goldwater. Some even blamed him for John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Perlstein ends his story with Ronald Reagan poised in the mid-1960s for greater things to come. But there are moments when I wondered just how much of conservatism's future can be squeezed out of a story about Goldwater. Certainly Goldwater was a symptom of a coming sea change in American politics, a backlash that lasted. But the distance between 1964 and 1980, let alone 1994, still seems great to me. I was left wanting to see Perlstein establish some better connections, rather than the compacted story told here. After all, didn't the successors of Goldwater really need conflicts over the heightened escalation in Vietnam, the New Left fissures of the late 1960s, continued racial conflict, and the "culture wars" more familiar to the 1980s? I doubt the Right would have gotten where it is now armed only with another Goldwater and not the history we've lived through since 1964.

On the other hand, Perlstein sheds light on the central plight of the Right—a plight as important today as it was in Goldwater's time. Certainly, the Right possesses a set of libertarian ideals many Americans embrace. Yet its leaders seem forever tempted to go overboard. The ghost of Barry Goldwater lives in the guise of Newt Gingrich, Tom DeLay, and Steve Forbes. Telling the Goldwater story, Perlstein has illuminated a great deal about politics past, present, and future. □

Kevin Mattson *is associate director of the Walt Whitman Center (Rutgers University). A historian, he is author of* Creating a Democratic Public *(1998) and a forthcoming book on intellectuals and the New Left.*

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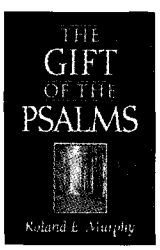

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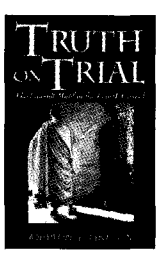

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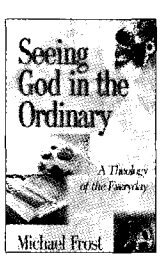

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CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

Expert disagreement

Gordon Marino's critique of ethics experts and of the applied ethics industry seems to me to diverge into two possibly inconsistent lines of argumentation ["Avoiding Moral Choices," March 23]. On the one hand, he questions the very idea of expertise in ethics; on the other hand, he questions whether a Ph.D. in ethics qualifies a person as an expert. But could we not answer the second question negatively and the first positively?

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Aristotle, as Marino remarks, had no truck with the sophists of his day and age; yet he believed in ethical excellence and thought it worthwhile for mature persons to reflect upon basic questions of how to live. My strong suspicion is that Marino, as a teacher of philosophy, agrees on both these counts, and that what really irks him about ethics experts and the applied ethics industry is that they can sometimes if not often be all too unreflective (while putatively excusing or even disempowering us laypeople from thinking for ourselves).

An alternative diagnosis to what is wrong with ethics today is that it has become too theoretical, or, from another perspective, not theoretical enough. As Marino knows, introductory ethics courses often present students with one theory after another: first a little Aristotle, then perhaps some Hume, next to Kant, and finally John Stuart Mill, or even Kierkegaard or Nietzsche. What such survey courses rarely communicate is the genesis of the theory in question: in other words, how it belongs to a more general understanding of the cosmos and our place in it, the fundamental questions to which the practice of philosophy is dedicated. (Compare Thomas Shannon's "The Human Genome," March 23.) Kant's ethics, for example, cannot be understood apart from his system; he does not mean by "autonomy" doing whatever one likes, but abiding by the dictates of reason—as elucidated in his several critiques. My question to Marino is how he thinks we should discuss ethics. More precisely, if the applied ethics industry is here to stay, and if there is even a role for ethics experts in our hospitals and laboratories and boardrooms (as he grudgingly acknowledges), what should an ethics curriculum look like?

BERNARD G. PRUSAK
Boston, Mass.

The author replies:

I am grateful to Bernard Prusak for opening up the questions that he does; however, my concerns about the ethics industry do not stem from my qualms about the smorgasbord approach to ethics education he aptly describes. In the most general terms, I am, as I tried to express in my essay, skeptical about the claims to authority made by ethicists and by the growing tendency to think of ethical questions as though they were best left to the experts. Prusak is right to suggest that the ethicists have found a niche and are here to stay. While I am clear about what I take to be the temptations of professional ethics, I need to give more thought to the question, "What might be a positive way of relating oneself to ethicists?" Now, if it turned out that professional ethicists were essentially *poseurs*, this would be a difficult homework assignment.

GORDON MARINO

Pius, again

The controversy in the April 6 Correspondence pages over the actions of

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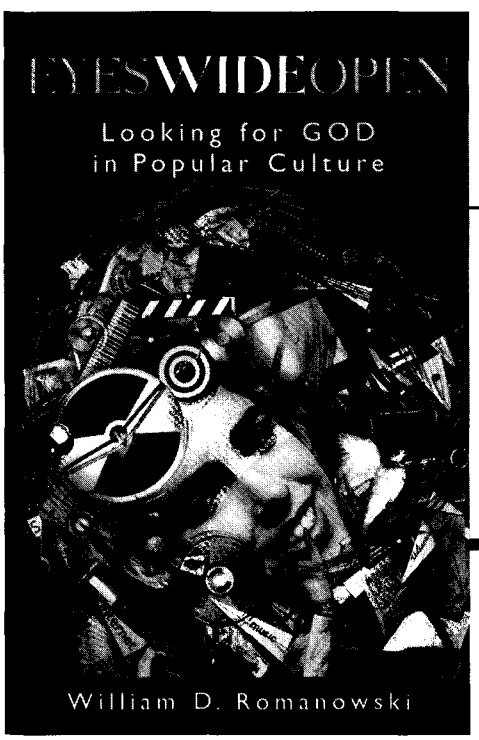

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Pius XII during World War II revealed one item agreed on by both sides—that Pius preferred a diplomatic approach to Nazi crimes. It might be proper to ask what would have been a worst-case scenario if he had taken a more courageous action. It could have been that Saint Peter's and the Vatican were bombed to rubble and the pope dead or held captive. We can also imagine the effect of this on the German prelates who were telling their people to support the war, the nations debating whether to join the Allied war effort, and since the Nazis were obviously trying to keep the details of their Final Solution secret, the effect of worldwide publicity in stopping or slowing the killing.

Yes, Christ himself could probably have avoided the Crucifixion if he had toned down his rhetoric, confined himself to a personal morality, and stopped speaking truth to power. But all Christians have to realize that we are not above our master. True Christianity is a risky business!

I remember an incident from the history of the early church, when Leo I, who had just faced down Attila the Hun, marched out with his whole retinue to meet the invading Vandal armies. Another, even earlier tale, probably apocryphal, tells of a Peter who lost his nerve and was fleeing the Roman persecution when he met Christ on the road walking in the opposite direction. His famous question, *"Quo vadis, Domine?"* was answered, "To Rome to be crucified a second time."

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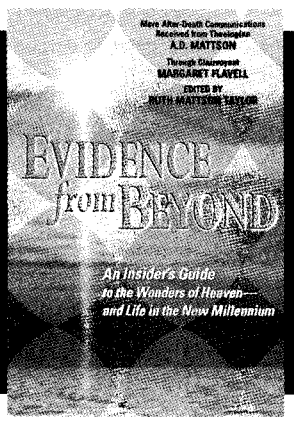
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A MOVABLE PRIEST

Mary Margaret Carberry

I suppose they're teaching it now in Preaching 101.

No, I haven't actually researched this with a representative number of seminaries. But the last two seminarians who spoke in support of vocations at Mass in my parish raced—and I mean *raced*—out into the middle aisle as soon as they were introduced.

That's why I'm more than a tad suspicious that today's seminaries must now have courses in which future homilists are instructed to get out into the middle of the congregations to speak.

No doubt the word is being spread at annual priests' meetings and in deacons' training classes as well. More and more of these gentlemen seem to feel impelled to do this, too, even though the truth is that there are not many sermonizers who can carry it off successfully.

I do know a few, but only a few. They are usually tall, gifted with compelling voices that project well even without a microphone, and their messages are, of course, well prepared and meaningful. Also, more often than not, once they have selected a speaking spot in the aisle, they stay right there. They are not holy roamers.

Somebody, somewhere out there, however, has come up with the idea that if a preacher is down among the pewfolks, his message will always be more effective, that it will be welcomed more warmly when delivered in the middle of a crowd on a sort of buddy-to-buddies basis. So forget the noble example of the Sermon on the Mount. Get down there where only a few people can actually see you.

But why do you suppose the pulpit, the lectern, the ambo (if you want to use the liturgical word that probably only three people in the parish know) provide an elevated position from which the priest can look out over the congregation and from which he can be seen? Without stadium seating, short men simply can't be seen by most of the congregation.

True, you can occasionally wiggle around in the pew to establish a clear sight line between the large heads and broad shoulders of the taller folks in front of you. But if a short preacher moves around while speaking, it rarely works, even if the message is marvelous. People in the pews do tend to want to see the homilist so that they may appreciate the full effect of his words. Believe it or not, the disembodied voice is not particularly attention-getting, except in scary movies. In the real world, being seen helps being heard.

While this observation may seem to confirm in part the "medium is the message" theory, sometimes the messenger/medium can unintentionally create a special type of holy havoc: simple, fascinating, non-gospel distraction. Not so long ago, I watched a priest whom I had never heard before move around so vigorously during his homily, not only striding forward but also recklessly backing up in a reverse march-step, that I could only wonder if he would soon take a fall, stumbling over the altar steps perilously close behind him. Fortunately, he didn't, but it had surely seemed to me to be a distinct possibility. So I readily confess I didn't get anything much out of what he was saying. The chance of seeing him take a backwards flip in full Sunday vesture was too dazzlingly promising.

I realize that peripatetic middle-aisle sermonizing is done in earnest, and that the basic idea even goes back to Aristotle. But the truth is that with several hundred people crowded into the pews on a Sunday morning, the homilist will make his best impression if he can be seen as well as heard. And that means that he should speak from the pulpit. Cogently and briefly, of course. □

Mary Margaret Carberry *writes from Chicago.*

"Nice quiet place you have here."

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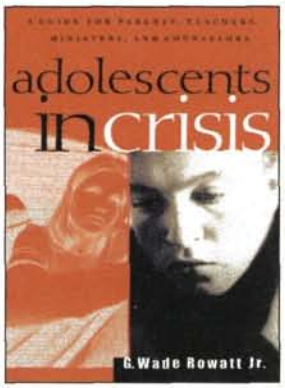

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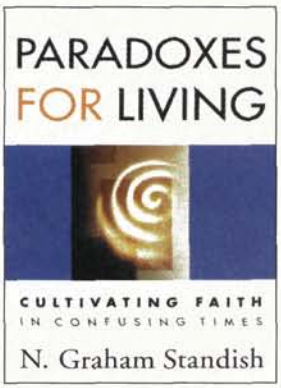

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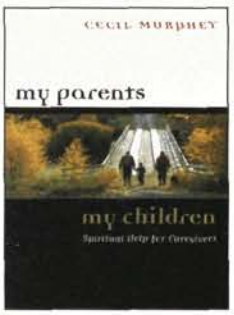

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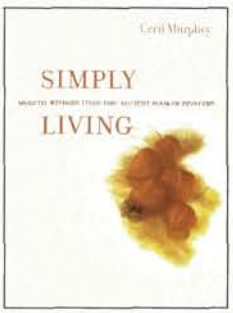

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